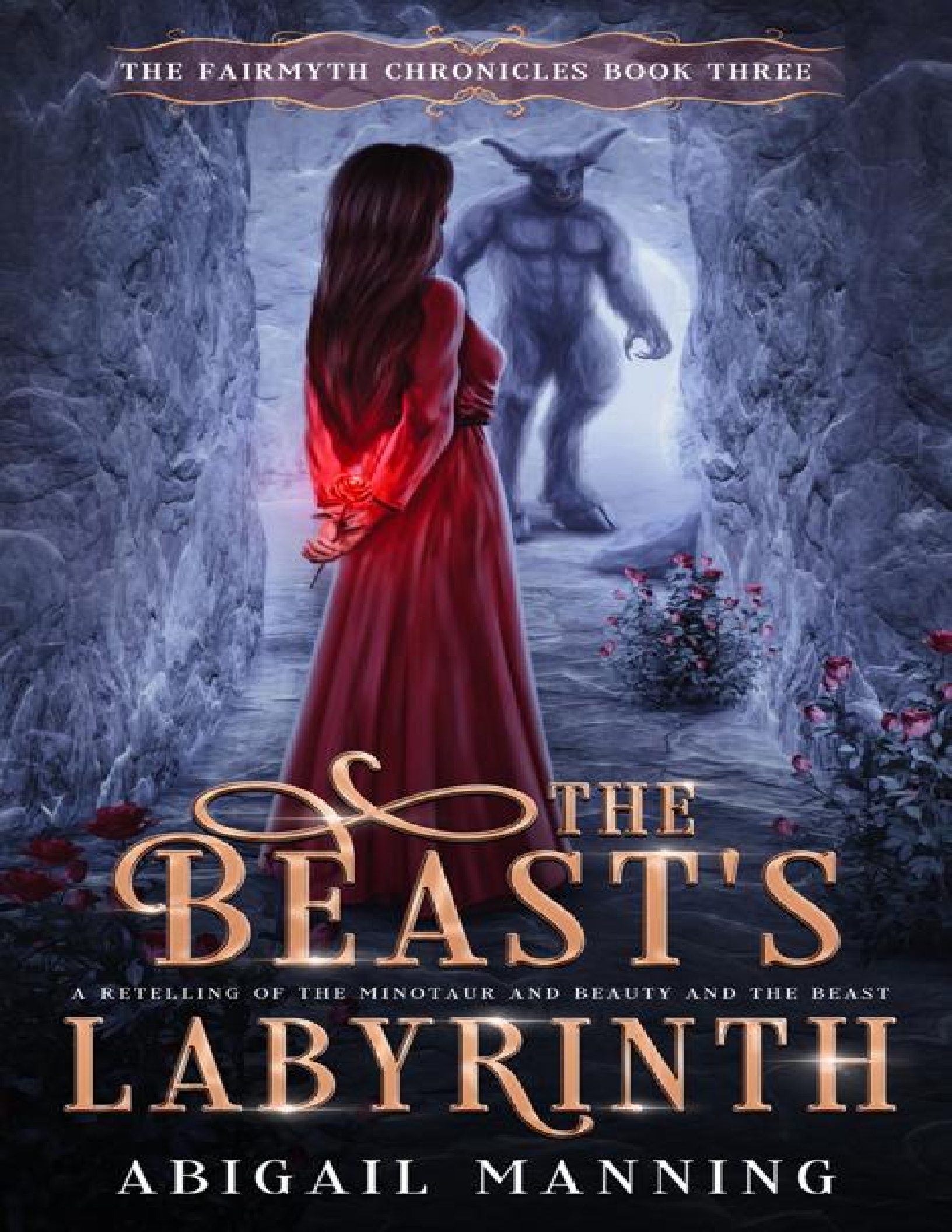




THE FAIRMYTH CHRONICLES BOOK THREE

THE BEAST'S LABYRINTH

A RETELLING OF THE MINOTAUR AND BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

ABIGAIL MANNING

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The Fairmyth Chronicles
Book Three

The Beast's Labyrinth

A Retelling of The Minotaur and Beauty and the Beast

Abigail Manning

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prologue

It's perfect... a prison so intricate that not even any of the three divine kings could find their way out of it.

Malik gazed at his mountains of maps, diagrams, and notes that made up the secrets of his endless maze. As the divine one of puzzles, it only made sense that King Zion would entrust him with building a prison that even his brothers would fear being entrapped in. Malik had spent his life perfecting his magic, aiming to please the king and strike fear in the hearts of anyone who dared disobey his rule. A kingdom was only as safe as its dungeons were dangerous, and now Olympia carried the biggest threat in all of Fairmyth.

Just wait until King Zion gets a look at all this...

The prison was Malik's masterpiece, and he was its artist, its keeper, its jailer... Not even King Zion would be permitted to know the secret behind the labyrinth, which would, in some ways, make him just as powerful, if not more so, than the mighty Olympian king. He brushed aside some of the scattered pages, unearthing the plucked rose that had gotten smothered under the papers.

It was a rich blood-red color, with full petals that bloomed wider than a pomegranate. The petals shimmered with the smallest touch of iridescent light, spiraling outward from the center of the bloom like a bursting star. Malik picked up the stem, raising the petals to his eyes as a devious smile spread across his lips like a greedy crocodile.

"And every perfect cage needs a perfect key," he whispered to himself in a gravelly voice. The rose seemed to respond to his grip, pulsing with its soft glow like a speeding heart rate. He set the rose in a vase to keep from losing it under his papers again but didn't bother filling it with water—the magic would preserve it just fine.

A storm was raging outside his modest home. The tin roof rattled from the pelting drops, which would usually drive him mad when he was

trying to work, but today it was just a reminder that this life was only temporary. After he presented the labyrinth to the king tomorrow, his family would be living the life they deserved.

“Malik?” His wife, Everleigh, stepped into his study, their nearly one-year-old son swaddled in her arms, balanced over her newly pregnant stomach. “Are you coming to bed soon? It’s dreadfully late.”

“Ah, yes, my dear,” Malik said as he shifted in front of the rose, keeping it out of his wife’s direct line of sight. “Give me just a few minutes to clean up, and I’ll be right down.”

Everleigh nodded, her eyes dark with shadows as their son started thrashing in her arms. He was always restless on stormy nights like this, which meant Everleigh wasn’t getting any sleep, either.

“Do you mind if I leave him with you?” Everleigh asked. “Just until you come to bed. The baby is sapping all my energy, and I could really use a little rest.”

Troublesome woman... Doesn’t she know the children are her duty?

“Of course, dear,” Malik said with a pinched smile. He couldn’t have anyone, even his wife, poking around his work. So, if taking his son allowed her to sleep, then at least he could keep her from lingering in his study any longer. “There’s a cradle by the door; just leave him there, and I’ll tend to him if he gets too fussy.”

Everleigh let out a long sigh of relief, her face brightening as she located the old cradle that barely fit the growing boy now. “Thank you, Malik. I’ll see you when you’re done.” She cupped a hand over her small baby bump and made her way back to the bedroom without a second of hesitation.

Malik glanced over at the child and was relieved to find he had snuggled right into the familiar cradle. He must have enjoyed the snug squeeze because he was already fading back to sleep.

Perfect, one less thing for me to worry about.

Malik went back to work, shifting through the papers and moving aside the rose vase, but he didn’t get far into his work before a soft knock echoed on the front door.

A visitor? At this hour?

The study was right across from the entryway, so Malik took a moment to flip over any important documents and toss a sheet over the rose before hurrying to the door. He looked back at the child one final time, assuring he was asleep before opening the front door just a crack.

“Hello?” he asked, his voice nearly swallowed by the thundering storm.

“Good evening, sir.” An older woman, uglier than a misshapen bat, stood on his stoop, completely drenched in rain. “Forgive me for my brashness, but I was wondering if I could beg you for shelter from the storm? Just for the night, of course.”

She smiled at Malik, showcasing a mouth full of missing or yellowed teeth. Malik shifted uncomfortably, wishing his pregnant wife was still nearby so he could use her as an excuse.

“I’m sorry, madam. I’m afraid you’ll have to look elsewhere for shelter,” Malik said coldly as he started to close the door.

The woman caught the door with her bony foot, preventing him from shutting it all the way. “Oh please, sir,” the woman begged. “I don’t have any money, but I am quite gifted with plants. I can offer you my services in return. I can grow you an entire garden overnight or even change that rose on your desk into a full bush.”

“R-rose?” Malik spun around, accidentally letting the door fling open as he turned to see the sheet covering the rose had slipped off. *Blast it.* He should have moved it somewhere out of sight. “I don’t need any of your services; now leave before I lose my temper.”

The woman’s kind smile faded, her eyes wide with fear as she looked back at the stormy road. “Are you certain, sir?” she asked one final time. “I sense that rose of yours could use some tending... I really would be more than happy to offer my services.”

Services... Why is she so fascinated by my rose!? Unless...

“You...” Malik narrowed his eyes at the woman, seeing past her hideous features and looking at the slight green glow in her irises. “You’ve come to spy on me, haven’t you!? Looking to guilt your way into my home so you can investigate my work!”

Of course... the other kingdoms must have learned about my work, and now they want it. They think they can take my glory, take everything I've worked so hard to achieve...

“Spy?” The woman staggered back a step. “Sir, I can promise you I —”

“Who do you work for!?” Malik grabbed the woman by the collar of her cloak, shaking her wildly and causing water to fly from her clothes. “Is it King Phineas? King Hayden? Who wants to know about my labyrinth!?”

“No one! I—”

“Leave!” Malik released her shoulders at the same moment he rocked her back, sending the old woman tumbling to the ground and splashing into a puddle. “Get away from my house before I do more than just turn you away!”

The labyrinth is mine... no one shall know the secrets of my inescapable prison. As long as I live, I will protect the legacy I have built. I will never let the labyrinth be weakened. It shall remain the perfect fortress.

Malik started to close the door, his head ringing as his son's cries started to echo from the other room. He must have heard him yelling. He had nearly closed the door when a low, gravelly voice froze him in his tracks.

“You fool,” the woman said in a tone that sounded completely different from before. “You dare insult another divine one with your pride?”

A flash of green light blasted in front of Malik, and he had to hide behind the door to keep himself from being blinded. When the light faded, Malik looked back outside to find the old hag replaced by a beautiful woman, graced with long ebony hair, cocoa-colored skin, and piercing green eyes that radiated power. He had seen those eyes before, at the council of divine ones he had been permitted to attend two years ago.

“Y-you...” Malik pointed at the divine one as he blinked the rest of the light from his eyes. “You're Flora, the divine one of gardens.”

“And you're Malik,” she stated in a tone that could only be compared to the sound a steel blade makes when slicing into a chunk of ice. “The

divine one of puzzles. I do not know what part that rose plays in your labyrinth, but my power tells me it is full of darkness that should not be kept in a single man's control. If you know what is good for you and your family, you'll hand the rose over."

So I was right... She wants control over my labyrinth.

"No." Malik stood firm, his expression hard as he tuned out his son's cries. "As the king's official jailer, I shall not compromise the integrity of his prison. Not even a fellow divine one shall be permitted to learn more. The labyrinth needs to be feared by *all*. If seeing that rose makes you uneasy, then it's doing its job."

No one can know the secrets behind the rose...

Flora's eyes darkened, the rich green color sparking in her gaze. She took a step forward, and stinging nettles sprang up from the ground behind her, twisting and tangling as the raindrops clung to the thorns. She stopped an inch in front of the door, her powerful presence thudding Malik's heart and racing his blood as a crack of lightning flashed behind her.

"I care not about your maze or the pride it gives you," she said in a booming voice. "But if you refuse to let me undo whatever darkness lies inside that flower, then I will have no choice but to ruin all you've created."

Ruin? Surely, she's bluffing.

Malik didn't flinch. His ego was as strong as his maze walls, and he let his eyes flicker in response to hers. "Do your worst, wench," he spat. "The maze and all its pieces are mine."

His son's cries grew louder, and Malik glanced back toward the cradle just before a blast of green light flooded his entire home. Hot energy flooded the room but whipped around his divine skin, circling toward the study. He recognized the strength of this magic—a curse. Placing curses on other divine ones had been forbidden since the three great kings separated, but her magic wasn't directed at Malik...

His son stopped crying.

"It's your choice now. What do you treasure more? Your precious maze or..."

Malik didn't hear her. He ran into the study and tore the blanket off the sleeping child. He gasped, smacking a hand to his throat as he fought back a gag when he laid eyes on the disgusting creature.

It's a beast.

"What have you done to my son!?" Malik bellowed, his eyes flickering with magic that would do him no good against the powerful divine one.

"Nothing you can't undo," she said in an even tone. "The boy shall remain as hideous as your pride until the day you let it go. Only when someone escapes your unbreakable prison will the boy return to normal in the sun's glow. But heed this: Only one who is unafflicted by the curse can wield the key."

She glanced back toward the rose, and the last of Malik's fury came bursting out of his veins. Magic poured through him, and he charged for the door, his palms glowing with golden energy until he forced all his magic into the wood.

"Get out!" he screamed as his magic dove into the wood, transforming it into a series of locks, pins, and springs that required a puzzle master to open it. His magic settled, and the door sealed shut, leaving him alone with the quiet beast in the cradle.

Malik took a long breath, then turned back to the monster, his eyes still glowing with a new disgust toward the child. "I'm sorry, my boy," he said through gritted teeth. "I can't let your curse be broken. You are no longer perfect, but my labyrinth still is. And it must stay that way."

He glared at the beastly creature, his stomach turning from its ugly features.

"And you can't stay here looking like that." He grimaced, then looked over toward the sparkling rose and piles of paperwork. "But don't worry; I know just where to hide you. A place where you might even still be useful to me..."

chapter one

Thea stacked the books in her arms, balancing them precariously as she dusted the empty shelf. The particles flew up into her nose, but she bit back a sneeze. She didn't dare drop any of her master's books—that alone could be enough to lose her job.

She finished clearing away the dust with held breath, then returned the old notebooks exactly the way she found them. The rest of the shelves were just as dusty, so she tied an extra rag around her nose to avoid any more disruptive sneezes. Lord Malik's study was a vast and cluttered space that never ceased to be the worst part of Thea's day.

Everything had a proper place, but that place was never the same twice. The documents were off-limits, the drawers were off-limits, and even opening the windows wasn't permitted because the lord was so anxious about spies. All she was permitted to do was clean underneath the clutter and put it exactly back as she found it. Which was easier said than done when the notes stacked nearly as tall as his half-used teacup.

Even so, she was grateful for the work.

Thea went to work on the next set of shelves, making a mental note of where every item went so she could remember where to return it. It was hard for a mortal to find work in Olympia, especially when there were so many useful nymphs who could offer more than what Thea's two hands could manage. So, she couldn't leave any room for doubt. Everything had to be perfectly clean, yet perfectly untouched.

The last shelf was the most stuffed full of junk. Thea tugged the rag down from around her nose to get a better view of all the layered maps, compasses, and drawing utensils. She'd avoided cleaning this shelf the last few times she had been assigned to Lord Malik's study, but by the looks of it, none of the other maids had gotten around to dusting it on their rotations. It would be just her luck that Lord Malik would pick *her* rotation to complain about the shelf being left undusted.

Thea moved the trinkets, books, and pencils one at a time, careful not to shift even a cup of quills around so their feathers pointed in the same direction as when she began. She layered the items in an identical pattern on the floor, ensuring she could remember how to put it all back after the shelf was clean.

She set down the last tattered notebook and readied her rag for the dusting of a lifetime, but froze when she saw another piece of paper clinging to the back of the shelf. She dug her nails underneath it and pried it free from the oak, careful not to tear the fragile parchment.

What's this doing back here?

The paper was older than any of the others she'd come across in the study. The edges were brittle, and it was already yellowing with age. She flipped it over, narrowing her eyes on the contents with a curious mind she knew shouldn't be satiated. She instantly recognized Lord Malik's handwriting at the top, but the twisted, sketched image of his powerful maze looked different from the others she'd come across in the past. The heading was odd, too...

The Rose and the Labyrinth.

Footsteps echoed outside the study door, sending Thea into a panic as she looked down at the forbidden piece of parchment in her hands. Rule number one of working in Lord Malik's office: No snooping.

Drat.

Thea stuck the parchment with the rest of the shelf's contents on the floor, then hastily pulled out her rag to act as if she had only been cleaning. The door swung open in the midst of her scramble, and a pair of striking gray eyes latched onto her like a preying hawk.

"Hello there, Theabelle."

Thea didn't have to look to recognize Ceyden's smarmy voice. Lord Malik's son was the complete opposite of his private father. He loved it when eyes fell on him, especially Thea's eyes, even if she was rolling them.

"Do you need something, young lord?" Thea asked as she tried to make herself look too busy to interrupt. "My tasks are a bit lengthy for me to entertain much conversation, I'm afraid."

Was that a polite enough way to ask him to buzz off?

“Ah, yes, you did look rather *busy* while investigating my father’s documents.” Ceyden shut the door behind him slow and soft, trapping Thea in both the room and in her crime.

She froze, digging her hand into the rag as she took a subtle breath in through her nose. He saw her. Of all people...

“Investigating?” Thea turned around, cocking her brow with the most innocent expression she could craft while her heart pounded behind her ribs. “Forgive me, young lord, but I was merely inspecting your father’s materials for dust. It’s my duty to keep his study spotless, after all.”

Ceyden crept forward, that devilish look in his eyes making her wish she had something stronger than a rag in her hands. “Goodness, Theabelle, I had hoped you were a better liar than that,” he said with a slimy smile. “Lying is an artful craft that all future ladies must learn, but I suppose there’s still time.”

Here we go again...

“Considering I don’t aspire to elevate to the status of lady anytime soon, I don’t see why the craft would benefit me,” Thea said a bit more tartly than was likely wise to her employer’s son. “Besides, I wasn’t lying.”

“That’s more like it.” Ceyden grinned. He ran a hand through his dark blonde locks, the way he always did when he was trying to flirt. “That’s the confidence a lie needs. Perhaps you’ll make a decent noble, after all.”

“Did you miss the part where I said I have no interest in becoming a lady?” Thea said sharply, her muscles tensing as Ceyden continued to close the distance between them. Maybe she could snap the rag at him like a whip? Though that would certainly get her dismissed from the staff...

“I heard you. I just didn’t believe you,” Ceyden said with a sly lift of his brow. “I know all about you, Theabelle Aynna, and those adorable little sisters you have, who are all struggling to get by. I find it hard to believe that you wouldn’t be interested in a life where both you and your family would be well provided for. A life that only *I* can offer you.”

He stopped right in front of her, giving her a full view of his tall figure, chiseled jaw, and dazzling smile. There was no doubt that Ceyden

was handsome, but that was pretty much where his good qualities ended.

Well, there was his money, too...

But no money in the world is worth my dignity.

Thea hated the way Ceyden looked at her. His eyes always lingered too long on her figure before meeting her eyes, and his tone always sounded condescending, as if a meager mortal like Thea couldn't possibly understand what he was talking about. His divine gifts weren't much better than her own skills. Lord Malik's puzzle magic manifested in him as some sort of locating gift, useful for finding missing objects and, more commonly, Thea. His late mother was a mortal, just like Thea, so you'd think he'd show a little more respect, but that was too far below his lofty gaze.

"Ceyden, I'm flattered, but I have no interest in marrying at this time," Thea said frankly, lifting her chin to meet his stubborn gray eyes. "Now, if you'll excuse me; I have work to do."

Thea tried to push past him, but he stepped in front of her, laughing to himself as he stopped her so easily. Smacking him with her rag was growing more tempting by the moment.

"Hold on there, Thea." Ceyden wagged his finger at her, once again treating her like a child instead of a potential courtship. "We still have to cover the issue of your snooping. I don't *want* to tell my father what I saw you doing... so, perhaps, we can come to an understanding between the two of us."

For the love of Fairmyth...

Thea glared at him. "What do you want, Ceyden?"

"For a small crime like this?" Ceyden motioned to the fallen parchment. "Only a small fee. A kiss, perhaps?"

Thea threw up in her mouth a little, only managing to keep it down with a firm swallow. Her pride simmered, stirring up an anger that could be comparable to one of King Zion's electrical storms. She needed this job; her family needed her to keep this job. Yet, she knew that if she gave into this one *payment*, that would be the end of her freedom. Ceyden wouldn't stop finding ways to get more out of her until he had a ring stuffed on her finger.

“No,” Thea said, her heart threatening to beat out of her chest as her blood raced with panic.

Ceyden staggered back a step. “No? Theabelle, darling. Think about it, if I tell my father what you did—”

“Then I would lose my job,” Thea finished. “And if I stopped working in your home, then you likely would never see me again. Unless you’re willing to seek me out in the alleyways of the capital? Is that what you want, young lord?”

Thea held her breath as Ceyden eyed her down, sizing up her bluff as much as she was sizing up his. Would he really report her to his father?

A second later, Ceyden sighed, then stepped aside to allow Thea to pass. “I’ll let it slide this once,” he said in a tone low with warning. “But only because I care about you, Thea. If you care about that family of yours, you might want to consider being a bit more flexible.”

Controllable, you mean?

“I appreciate the concern, Ceyden,” Thea said with a silent breath of relief. She moved back around to the shelf, hastily wiping it down so she could get out of the cursed study. “But I can take care of myself.”

“You can’t always,” Ceyden said as he moved back toward the door. “And when the day comes that you realize that, remember who offered to give you a life worth living.”

Ceyden stepped out into the hall, leaving Thea alone with the dust. She lowered her rag with a deep sigh of relief, grateful that her job was still secure for another day.

His money isn’t worth my life.

Her family, on the other hand, was worth a lot more...

She only hoped Ceyden wasn’t right.

chapter two

His hooves clacked on the stone floor, followed by the soft swish of his tail. The walls quaked with each step, his towering form creating a vast shadow that even the labyrinth's magic couldn't brighten. He kneeled to the ground, careful not to crush any of the leaves or stems as he made himself as comfortable as a beast could while sitting among a patch of flowers.

Still no changes...

He inspected the rose patch with a detailed eye, hunting for any sign of decay, clues twisted in the thorns, or unique patterns in the leaves. There was nothing. Nothing except for the blossoming red blooms that always stayed the same. Perhaps today wasn't the day they would speak to him...

No day ever seemed to be.

He stood up from the rose patch and twisted his way through the cave's passages, stopping only to inspect the other patches of roses along the way. Nearly every other corner was covered in a small rose patch, each one slightly different but just as perfect as the others. There was no explanation why the flowers could survive in the labyrinth's harsh conditions, other than a magical one, hence why they had to be the key.

During his inspection, he decided one of the blooms looked like it might have been thirsty or it may have just been the shadows flickering the wrong way... but he wasn't going to take any risks. He made his way to the nearest water spring and filled up an old goblet that he'd scrounged from a deceased prisoner.

As he let the cup fill, he caught his reflection in the water. His piercing gray eyes were the only part of him that he could still bear to look at, but there was no avoiding the monster that reflected back at him.

He had never seen a bear or a bull, but those were the two animals most prisoners referred to him as when they saw him. He had long yellowed horns that sprouted out of the thick fur coating. The fur covered almost his entire body, making him a strange cross between creatures. His ears stuck out the side of his head like a bull or cow, and his nose was twisted upward into a snout, adorned with a large, golden ring. His mouth was full of fangs, with the bottom two poking out overtop his lips anytime he frowned. His torso was shaped like a man, but the muscles and fur made him look more like a bear mixed with an Olympian warrior.

His hands were almost human. The flesh was dark and thick, but he had palms, knuckles, and fingers just like any other mortal. The biggest difference was the sharp claws that sprouted from his fingertips, sharp enough to cut through bone if he really tried. His legs were slightly bent at the knees, always primed to pounce or kick at anyone who got too close. A few times, he'd considered stealing a prisoner's boots to cover his hooves, but there was no point in masking such a small part of him when the rest was so beastly. Though, the clacking of his hooves never ceased to remind him of the monster that he was...

The monster I can't seem to be free of.

The labyrinth whispered in his ear, the walls vibrating as a cold chill swept across his neck. Someone had entered the labyrinth, and they were already starting trouble...

"I'll handle it," he growled to the walls, picking up his axe and slinging it onto his back.

The metal weapon thumped against his spine, but he'd gotten used to the bruises. Day and night, he patrolled the maze as its unofficial executor, not that he could ever tell the difference between night and day. Time was irrelevant to all within the maze's walls. Once inside, the only time that mattered was the time of death. The labyrinth was the dumping ground for Olympia's most despicable criminals and also the hiding place for its most hideous monster.

The labyrinth guided him to the new prisoner, illuminating the tunnels with an orange hue that wasn't quite a light but was still bright enough to alert him which direction he needed to go. He looked down at the golden ring on his finger a few times to confirm the direction, allowing the mixture of magic to lead him to his newest guest.

“Cough it up! I’m sure you have some sort of map of this place!” A coarse voice rattled the walls, causing the glow of the labyrinth to back away. “Give me everything you have, or I’ll take your fingers!”

The beast shifted closer to watch, keeping himself immersed in the shadows as he studied the two men. One had been here for at least a week now. He hadn’t seemed like trouble, so the beast had decided to let him wander the maze and entertain his desire to look for a way out. Deep down, there was always a small hope in the beast’s heart that one man would find an exit and end his suffering, but perhaps he was only being cruel by letting the prisoners latch onto the false hope.

The newer prisoner was gripping the collar of the other man’s tattered shirt, shaking him violently as if trying to rattle the answers free from his parched lips.

“Do whatever you want with me...” the older prisoner rasped, his body frail from starvation and his scarred face twisted in bitter anger. “I’m going to rot here in this cursed cave either way.”

The beast reached for his axe, his clawed hands twitching around the handle as he balanced it into his grip. He always felt a touch of guilt whenever he saw prisoners in such a horrid state, especially when he had the power to cut their suffering short from the start. But he had to remind himself that these men weren’t innocent... The things they had done above the surface deserved every minute of suffering they earned in the maze.

Still... I can’t stand seeing them be tortured.

“Fine! You can rot! But tell me what you learned about this blasted maze first.” The stronger man shook him again. “A map, a way to avoid the maze’s monster, anything!”

“Maps are useless here,” the beast growled, his voice low as it resonated off the cave walls. He stepped forward, allowing his shadow to engulf the two men like an omen of death. “And as for the monster... there’s no avoiding him, either.” He flashed his polished axe, and the newer prisoner dropped the weakened one, staggering back with wide eyes.

“Y-you... Y-you’re...” He pointed at the beast’s face as his features twisted in horror. “You’re a b-beast! Get back, you vile creature!” He reached down and snagged a stone from the ground, then immediately threw it at the beast’s head.

The beast blocked it with his axe, letting it *clink* harmlessly off the metal. “At least I wasn’t vile by choice,” he said in a cold tone. “I don’t even want to know what horrific crimes sent you into my clutches.”

The man picked up another rock, reeling back to throw it but waiting for a better opening. “Nothing I did is deserving of seeing your ugly mug,” he hissed, flinging the rock and smacking the beast in the shoulder. Pain radiated down his arm and up his neck, but he didn’t even flinch. Stones weren’t nearly as painful as they used to be. “I only killed a couple of useless mortals who couldn’t pay their dues. It’s hardly fair that they get to go free after refusing to pay up for passing through my part of the city. Why must I end up here with a demon as my executor?!”

Another murderer. Despicable.

“I’m more than an executor,” the beast said as he stepped forward, glancing down at the second prisoner, who was too weak to even scream. He had been a murderer, too. The beast overheard him brag about how he burned down a shop with the owner still inside after a dispute over who had the better business. Remembering that made it easy to watch him suffer. “I’m your quickest escape.”

With a swift blow of his axe, the beast swung at the starved murderer’s head, ending his life before he even had a chance to realize it was over. There was no escape from the labyrinth that didn’t lead to Underworth. Those who accepted that fact sooner were the ones who suffered the least.

The remaining prisoner didn’t even flinch as he scoffed at the fresh corpse, “You filthy monster. You can’t expect me to believe there’s no other escape. I’ve heard the rumors that there’s a secret to this prison!”

Those blasted rumors... I hated those tiny morsels of hope.

“If you wish to draw out your torment, I won’t stop you,” the beast said as he wiped his axe clean with a scrap of burlap. “But when you’re ready for a merciful end, just call out, and I will grant it.”

The man’s face turned red, fuming with the pent-up pride and denial that seemed to be a reoccurring theme in the worst of men. “I don’t want your *mercy*!” He grabbed for more rocks, scooping up an entire armload. “I want *out*!” He pelted the beast with the stones, who let them bounce off his arms, legs, and chest. The beast absorbed each sting, trying not to let

his own anger get out of hand. *The resilient ones have the best chances of escaping, but still...* “You are no threat to me, and neither is this labyrinth! You’re just a big, ugly, disgusting—”

He threw a stone directly at the beast’s face, and his patience finally snapped. The beast opened his mouth, catching the stone between his fierce fangs with a low roar that rattled the walls and floors. The prisoner jumped, dropping the remaining stones in his arms. The beast spat out the stone, and it smacked to the ground only a few inches from the prisoner’s toes. The prisoner staggered back; hackles practically visible on the back of his neck as his eyes finally widened with fear.

I’m done being reasonable today.

“A beast... The hideous executor of the labyrinth,” the beast finished for him, turning back down the path he came from, the prisoner in his trembling silence. “If you don’t want my mercy, fine. You’ll never receive it. Call for me if you wish, but I’ll only watch you wither and starve.”

Let his pride be his torture.

chapter three

Thea cleared the dinner table, slipping the uneaten bread rolls into her pocket with a quick glance over her shoulder. She wanted to swipe some of the leftover ham slices, but there were too many dogs on her walk home that would chase her down with one whiff. Plus, she didn't want her uniform to smell like ham for the rest of the week.

She stacked the dishes and carried them back to the kitchen, waving goodbye to the cook and scullery maids before setting off for home. Lord Malik's property was one of the most stunning on this side of town. The kingdom's capital had even more impressive homes, but the puzzle master's was likely the grandest that wasn't right next to the palace. She imagined that he planned for that when selecting a place to build his home.

The capital was full of divine ones who were constantly comparing their riches, but out here, the only comparison was from the homes of nymphs and a few minor divine ones who couldn't hold a candle to Lord Malik's wealth. He was the king of his own little patch of Olympia. Even those closer to the castle respected him above others due to his control over the labyrinth. When one man held the power of the king's magnificent prison, many aimed to be on his good side.

Thea left the estate grounds and wandered through the cobblestone streets, tearing off a corner of one of the bread rolls to munch. The main roads always looked like a scene from a painting. The flowers were always in full bloom no matter the time of year; the sky was always clear and sunny unless King Zion was in a particularly bad mood, and the air just seemed to always carry a tune as it whistled past your ears. With so much magic in one kingdom, it wasn't shocking that it always felt so... well, magical. However, not every corner of the kingdom was quite so enchanting.

She turned down the concealed path that was starting to get overgrown with blackberry bushes again. Thea made a note to come back and pick the

berries before anyone could trim the bush. Perhaps her sisters could bring a basket tomorrow and do it before sunrise.

She cantered down the path as it weaved around the less charming parts of town. Old shops that had been forgotten for larger ones to be built, servant homes that were out of view from the rest of society, and measly farms that were being grown without the aid of magic.

Thea made her way to the shade of the trees, taking in a deep sigh as her eyes landed on the half-rotted cottage nestled in the front of the woods. It used to be a lot nicer when they had the money to keep it maintained, but ever since her father's boats sank two years ago, nothing had been the same.

It wasn't common for mortals to live in Olympia unless they were young, pretty, and caught the eye of a divine one. Theodore Aynna had been one of the exceptions when he took on the task of organizing trade ships between Olympia nobles and Oceanic nobles. He didn't need magic to be good at routing ships or communicating between clients. In fact, his natural skills surpassed the inherited traits most divine ones received.

He moved Thea and her sisters to Olympia to give them a better life and improve his trade, but after only five years, an entire fleet of ships were plundered and sunken by other mortals.

There was no recovery after such a loss. Any power his name had held was snuffed out like a doused flame, and every one of the funds he had saved was stripped away by the divine ones who had lost their goods at sea.

What a beautiful place Olympia was...

"Father, look! Thea is home!" Thalia poked her head out the window, her messy chestnut locks falling in front of her big brown eyes.

Warmth filled Thea as she smiled back at her youngest sister. No matter how dreary Olympia's underbelly could be, she could always count on her family to make her smile.

A second later, Belinda opened the door for Thea, and she could see the whole family waiting inside. The cottage only had one room and a fireplace that probably wasn't safe to burn, but it was the best they had on cold, rainy nights. It was more of a shack than a home, though it had been easy to come across when Father had to sell their house in the city to pay

off the debts he owed the Olympian nobility. Thalia and Belinda shared the only bed, which was starting to become too small for them both, and Dora, Clarabell, and Thea all shared the floor. Father usually slept sitting up in the creaky rocking chair in the corner, the same place he always occupied while waiting for his daughters to return home.

“There’s my beautiful girl,” Father beamed as he rose from his rocking chair to embrace Thea. “This little cottage is always so much brighter when all of my darling roses are together.”

Thalia giggled; she always loved it when Father called them pretty, or roses, or anything that made her feel more special than an eight-year-old beggar.

“It’s good to be home,” Thea said as she made herself comfortable on her patch of the floor. “You don’t even want to know what kind of day I had. That Ceyden fellow is going to get me sent to the labyrinth if he doesn’t stop making me want to kill him.”

Thea rolled her eyes and dug the bread rolls out of her pocket. She set them on the rusty dinner plate that sat in the center of the floor. It looked like her sisters had managed to pull together some decent contributions for tonight’s supper. There were some nuts and wild carrots Clarabell likely gathered, and a decent-sized chicken leg that Dora, no doubt, had prepared. It wasn’t much, but it felt good for Thea to see her hard work was putting food on the table—or at least, on the plate. In truth, her salary should be able to provide far more food than this, but if they wanted any chance of moving out of Olympia, then they needed to set aside plenty for their savings.

“What did he do this time?” Clarabell asked as she went to work dividing up the bread rolls and making tiny chicken sandwiches to pass around. “He isn’t still talking about marrying you, is he?”

“He best not be,” Father huffed. “No man gets a hold of my daughters unless they introduce themselves to me first.”

“Lord Ceyden doesn’t seem like the type to care about permission,” Thea said as she helped Clara distribute the meal. “But I can handle him. The job pays well, and I won’t let a bonehead like Ceyden ruin the first chance at making real money we’ve had in months.”

“Hey! I made some real money today.” Belinda argued with a bit of bread in her teeth. “I got a whole silver coin from a man who saw me on the street today! I’ve been practicing my *sad orphan* eyes, and he fell right into my trap.”

“But you’re not an orphan,” Dora scoffed.

“Yes, but the orphans get way more coin while begging.” Belinda shrugged. “If I’m not old enough to get a job, then I should be young enough to pass for a starving child.”

“Except you’re not starving, either,” Dora pointed out as she nodded at the carrot in Belinda’s grasp.

“And that’s only because I have mastered the art of begging,” Belinda said proudly. “You’d better feel grateful for this dinner, since it’s my cute face that brought it to the table.” Thea bit back a laugh. At only ten years old, Belinda was already more business savvy than most divine ones. Thea often feared what the world would do when she was finally old enough to put her devious mind to work.

“Oh, please.” Clara laughed. “We all know it’s Thea’s pretty face that puts food on the table. That Ceyden fellow might be a pain, but at least he has good taste. We would be worse off than starving orphans if he hadn’t brought her to his father for a job when he did.”

Thea took a bite of her sandwich, trying to avoid any conversations about work now that she was finally home. She knew she should be grateful that she found a job when she did. As the eldest, she was the only one old enough to work other than Father. Her sisters did what they could to help provide, and Father looked for work every day, but his reputation was too well known for him ever to find any leads. Thea hated that her job only came from Ceyden’s attraction to her, but it was still a job and one they desperately needed.

“Maybe Clarabell can find a nice divine one to give her a job when she turns eighteen next month!” Thalia bit her lip, unable to suppress her cheeky smile. “She’s really pretty, too!”

“Yeah, but not like Thea!” Belinda argued.

“Hey!” Clara shot them both a stern look, and they quieted down. “Being pretty is not the only way to get a job, you know. Thea is also a hard worker.”

“Yeah, but being pretty gets more money!” Belinda exclaimed. “Just yesterday, I saw a man offer Dora a gold coin in exchange for a kiss.”

Dora’s face went red. “Belinda!”

“Dora?” Father arched a brow.

“I didn’t do it!” Dora shook her head. “He was a creepy old water nymph. I told him no, then found another street to beg on.”

“Awe, I wish you’d said yes,” Thalia pouted. “A gold coin would have been awesome!”

“Thalia!” Thea scolded, popping her hands on her hips. “Kisses are not for sale. Don’t you ever let someone persuade you otherwise.”

“That’s not fair. You basically sell your pretty face for a job,” Belinda crossed her arms.

“That’s—”

“That’s entirely different, Belinda,” Father cut the girls off, his deep, *no-nonsense* voice hushing the room. “Thea is working a perfectly respectful job that just happened to come with a disrespectful nuisance. But she *knows* that no one in this family would ever ask her to continue working there if she was ever uncomfortable. Just like none of you should ever do anything you don’t feel safe doing.”

Father gave Thea one of the soft smiles that always reassured her and broke her heart all at once. She knew Father wouldn’t ask her to keep her job if he knew how much trouble Ceyden really caused her, but she couldn’t let any of them know just how serious Ceyden had become about marrying her. While she had no intention of giving up her life to that pompous jerk, she always found herself considering it when she looked around at her family’s circumstances.

Just one little yes and my sisters would be taken care of forever.

“Even if Thea quit, Ceyden might still ask her to marry him,” Clara said as she dabbed at the crumbs on her dress. “He seems to be pestering you more by the day. What will you do if he actually tries to propose?”

It wouldn’t be the first time...

“Thea can do whatever she likes,” Father answered for her. “She doesn’t owe that man anything, and with any luck, we’ll be on our way to

Mortalia to start over in just a few short months. None of you should have to entertain a man who drives you mad.”

“Thank you, Father,” Thea smiled, though her heart tensed behind the façade. “Do you really think we’re only a few months away from being able to relocate to Mortalia?”

Father’s smile dropped a touch, but he did his best not to let his concern seep too far into his expression. “I’m hopeful,” he said. “Unfortunately, I just received word from the capital that we’ll be required to pay taxes on our home this year. I was originally led to believe that this land was free to take residence in, but it turns out Lord Malik’s property extends to this cottage.”

“What!” Dora gasped. “You mean we have to pay Lord Malik for this beat-down home? Why? It’s not like he maintains it!”

“I don’t make the laws, dear.” Father sighed. “And I don’t dare offend the keeper of the labyrinth. We’ll manage, just like we always do, but I won’t know how much the taxes are until I go to the courthouse in a few days.”

“What happens if we can’t afford the taxes?” Thea asked, her breath snagging in the back of her throat. *Father’s right; we can’t offend the keeper of the labyrinth...*

“Then I suppose I’ll have to strike some sort of deal with him, but I don’t see it coming to that.” Father’s smile was so easy, Thea almost believed he was right...

Almost...

“This home is barely even a speck on his property, so I can’t imagine he would ask for much. Don’t you girls worry about it,” Father said as he settled back into his rocking chair with a long sigh and a creak from the wood. “This is one thing I can actually handle as your father, so please let me take this burden from your shoulders.”

No one argued with him. They all knew how much it pained Father to watch his daughters work and beg while he struggled to provide for his family. Thea could only imagine how difficult it was for him to endure. Even while she was working, she felt like she was never doing enough, and the only other thing she could do was sign her life away to a divine brat.

Thea settled back against the cool stone walls, trying to engage in whatever conversation Belinda had struck up about her favorite new alley cat, while her mind wandered in the background.

They could be so much more... Am I the one being selfish by keeping us like this?

Ceyden may have been an entitled jerk, but he wasn't blowing smoke about being able to provide for her family. She knew her family would never approve of a union where she was unhappy, but would they really deny a chance to finally live securely?

Yes... Without a doubt, they would if it meant my happiness, too.

Thea sighed, her heart teetering between being sunken and lightened when she saw the smiles on her sisters' faces. She would do whatever it took to ensure those smiles never fell. Her sisters were every bit as beautiful as she was, so she couldn't let them put her beauty up for sale.

I'll keep them safe on my own.

chapter four

Thea took a deep breath before stepping into the dark pits of despair, also known as Lord Ceyden's bedroom. She got out of cleaning the master's study today, but at the cost of being left with what was easily the most putrid room in the entire estate.

She opened the door and was impressed that the odor was only slightly offensive compared to the disastrous state the floors were in. Dirty tunics, trousers, and worn socks littered the plush carpets, along with various cups that had been carried up from the kitchen and never returned. The maids were instructed only to clean the young lord's room once a week since he preferred not to have his belongings messed with, which meant that not even his bed had been made for the last seven days. The covers were twisted at the end of the four-poster bed, and the pillows were flat and in dire need of fluffing. While Thea could understand not wanting servants invading your personal space every day, she couldn't validate treating such a beautiful room so horrendously.

Just goes to show that Ceyden doesn't truly value beautiful things.

Thea went straight to work, gathering up the unwashed laundry and stacking it in a pile by the door. The washing would take the whole second half of the day, so she decided to finish off the room first so she wouldn't have to return and risk running into the young lord again. She tidied up the bed, replaced the sheets, and gave the pillows a good fluff outside the open windows. She collected the stray goblets Ceyden had left around the room and even dusted his desk that didn't appear to have been used in the last month.

The open windows cleared out the smell of stale laundry, warming the space with the fresh sun and bright blue sky. Upon closer inspection, Thea spotted a few streaks on the window's glass and went to work wiping them clean. The fresh air tempted her to hurry outside and do the washing. She just loved the cool autumn breeze as it tickled her senses and prickled the

hair on the back of her neck. After taking a long breath, she closed them up before the young lord could blame her for letting any flies in, her gaze still glued to the world outside the glass.

The leaves never changed in Olympia since the seasons were restricted from cycling by magic, but you could still feel the chill in the air when winter came—even if it wasn't actually cold—and everything just felt crisper as autumn crept closer. Thea dreamt of returning to Mortalia... back where the seasons always shifted, and the rain was allowed to fall as it pleased, not just when the king was angry. It had once been a dream to move to Olympia, too, but that was back when they had a hopeful future, a bed for all her sisters, and no pushy lords trying to force marriages on her.

She paused her cleaning to let her eyes wander, admiring the view of the Olympian palace's towers. Olympia truly was a beautiful place, but it was beautiful in the same way a cake was delicious. A nice treat, but not enough to keep you satisfied forever. At least, not as it was now...

“Enjoying the view?”

Thea jumped, instantly recognizing the low voice that crawled under her skin.

“I suppose the palace does look pretty good from this angle.” Ceyden crept into the room. “Though there's a far more striking view in front of it.” He winked at Thea, and she swallowed back a gag.

“I wouldn't know, I couldn't see anything through all the dust in the air.” Thea wrapped her rag around her wrist. “I don't understand how you can live this way when you have so many servants willing to attend to you.”

“Perhaps I don't like servants,” Ceyden said, as he leaned back against one of the posts on his bed, his eyes following Thea like she was a delicious piece of sponge cake. “I prefer someone closer to me taking care of my needs. I can only imagine how lovely it would be to have an adorable little wife willing to do all the cleaning.”

“Isn't that just an adorable little daydream?” Thea said as she started collecting the laundry to take outside. “I wish you the best of luck in fulfilling it with a rich, young divine one.”

“Oh, but divine ones are always so stuffy,” Ceyden said as he stepped in front of the door, blocking Thea’s path. “I prefer women with a bit more... gratitude for what I can offer them.”

Gratitude?

“I’m sure there are loads of women who would be grateful to receive your affection. Now, if you’ll excuse—”

“Women who are grateful for the jobs they’ve been given.” Ceyden’s voice dipped, the low, oily tone already making Thea feel slimy. “Or grateful for what I could do to help their families...”

Not this again...

“Ceyden, I appreciate all you’ve done for me, but I don’t intend to ask for any more of your help,” Thea said pointedly.

Ceyden laughed, a low, dry chuckle that scratched at Thea’s patience. He reached for Thea’s face, tracing a finger under her chin as he lifted her stubborn glare to meet his. Her skin itched under his touch, but she didn’t dare move. He would find a way to put the blame on her if she walked away now.

“Oh, little Theabelle. We both know there’s more you want from me,” he said with a *tsk*. “I hear your father received a court summons the other day to discuss tax payments on your cute little excuse for a home. I may not be the one in charge of that land *yet*, but I’m sure I could persuade my father to lower the rates... or even make them disappear altogether.”

Thea’s jaw stiffened under Ceyden’s touch, and he noticed her flinch. She hated that he got a reaction out of her, even if it was just a small one. The temptation flickered in her chest for a moment, but she stamped it out before it could spark. Father told her not to worry about the taxes. He and her sisters wouldn’t accept any charity from Ceyden if it meant Thea had to sacrifice her dignity in exchange.

I won’t give into you, Ceyden. Not now, not ever.

“I’m sure you could, but as I said before, there is nothing I have left to ask of you.” Thea jerked her chin away, his nail scratching her skin like a claw trying to hook her closer. “My gratitude, just like myself, cannot be purchased.”

Thea scooped up the basket of laundry, her heart thudding in her ears as she tried to move past the stubborn lord. He didn't budge from the door, holding her hostage with a predatory look in his eyes that would have made her fearful had she not already been so energized.

"I thought you were smarter than that, Thea." Ceyden folded his arms, looking down on Thea like she was a lamb that should have counted itself lucky to be admired by the lion. "Or, at the very least, less selfish."

"Selfish?" Thea gaped. *For not allowing myself to be controlled by a spoiled brat?*

"I was in town yesterday and saw a sweet young woman begging for coins by a fruit stand," Ceyden said. "Poor Clarabell; she looked so pathetic, begging others for a coin. I think I saw little Thalia there, too? She definitely looked uncomfortable when a strange man came up to her to ask her some questions. It's a shame to see such sweet girls on the street. I wonder how long they'll survive that way?"

Thea bit down on her tongue, her patience snapping like a fragile branch in a hurricane as she tightened her grip around the laundry basket. This man... this *lord* knew the full extent of her family's misery, yet was perfectly content to flaunt it over her head as both the carrot and the stick. He teased her with comfort, then threatened her with poverty. Putting up with his flirting had been one thing, but allowing him to taunt her sisters' well-being...

Enough is enough.

Thea dropped the basket, stepping over the spilled laundry and kicking a sock to the side. "Don't," she clipped, stopping right in front of his face before she threw her knuckles closer. "Don't pretend to care about me when you're content to watch those that *I* care about suffer. You may be infatuated with me, but a man like you could never love me. I'm grateful for the kindness you've shown me, but I'm not grateful for your impudence."

Thea pushed past him, leaving the laundry behind as she reached for the brass doorknob. No sooner had the cool metal hit her skin, than Ceyden grabbed her by the shoulder, spinning her around so she halfway faced him.

“Watch yourself, Thea,” he spat her name, but his grip felt so possessive, like even her outburst wasn’t enough to lessen his desire to own her. “My *impudence* is the reason your family is at least getting fed. I care plenty for you, but my support comes with a price you’re already well aware of. Marry me, Thea, and you’ll save them all. Don’t blame me because your family is suffering while you’re incapable of making a decision.”

He truly thinks he can claim me... and he always will.

Thea jerked her shoulder back, freeing herself from his clawed grip. “That’s not true, Ceyden,” she said with her chin held high as she pulled the door open. “I have made a decision. I will *not* marry you, and I quit.”

chapter five

Ceyden stood in the doorway; all words lost on his tongue as he watched Thea's slender figure vanish around the corner. His teeth ground together, unsure how any woman, let alone a *mortal*, could have the audacity to deny him on multiple occasions.

Was she mad? Did she enjoy living in filth?

Surely, she had to have something loose inside that mind of hers; otherwise, she wouldn't have been such a fool. His father was one of the most powerful divine ones in all of Fairmyth. She should know better than to trifle with those above her. Ceyden slammed the door and kicked the discarded laundry pile Thea had refused to wash. She couldn't quit! How was she planning to support that grimy little family of hers? Did she plan to beg as well?

Ceyden imagined Thea sitting on the side of the street, fluttering those thick dark lashes at every nobleman who passed by and earning coins with her smile. The thought sickened him. Thea should be *his* to look at and provide for, not some cheap prize any man can toss coins at. She couldn't possibly want to be like the rest of her family, not when she could be so much more as his wife.

He threw open his bedroom window, his nails digging into the windowsill as he watched Thea exit out the front door with her tattered cloak not even over her shoulders. He wished she would look back... wished he could see the regret in her eyes when she recalled all she was walking away from. But she never turned around...

As proud as a peacock, Thea walked off into the horizon and disappeared from Ceyden's grip for good. He spat an unsavory word and stormed back inside, punching the nearby piece of furniture that so happened to be a mirror. Glass shattered everywhere, shredding his hand and spattering blood across the carpet. He kept his knuckles pressed into

the fractured glass, letting out a few deep breaths before finally pulling his hand back and shaking the shrapnel free from his skin.

“She’s not getting away from me that easily,” he growled under his breath. “I didn’t get her a job just for her to run away from me in the end. Thea owes me, and I intend to collect my pay...”

And I’ll make sure she does it willingly. I want to see her crawl back to me and beg for my forgiveness.

Ceyden picked up an old tunic from the laundry pile and wiped the blood from his knuckles on the fabric before returning it to the floor. The broken glass stuck to the bottom of his shoe, crunching with each step until he made it out into the hall.

“You.” He grabbed a passing maid by the shoulder, causing the older woman to gasp from the rough snatch. “There’s a mess in my chambers. Clean it up.”

“Y-yes, Lord Ceyden,” the woman said with a stiff bow, nearly spilling the basket of silverware in her arms. “Right away.”

Ceyden stormed down the hallway, his blood flaring through his veins as a soft orange light illuminated his gaze.

Find the apothecary’s herbs.

His magic tuned into his request, locking the location and creating a mental map in his mind for him to follow. One of the benefits of having a rich father and a large estate was having your apothecary on demand in case anyone in the family ever fell ill. Ceyden followed the map in his mind, making his way to the lower levels of the manor until he found himself being drawn to a greenhouse just outside of the manor walls. He stepped outside, walking over a few annoying flowers that blocked his path and crossing straight through the garden instead of using the pitiful walkways.

He tossed open the greenhouse door, pleased to find that no one was inside to pester him while he got to work. The scent of fresh herbs permeated his senses, causing him to scrunch his nose at the potent mixture of smells. Lavender bushes sprouted in pots, weedy-looking mint plants overtook cracks in the greenhouse floor, and a half dozen other plants he couldn’t identify lined the garden boxes in the center of the greenhouse.

In the corner was a cluttered desk, filled with vials, a mortar and pestle, and even a small wood burner that was likely used to boil plants or craft elixirs. Ceyden grabbed an empty vial, then went to work plucking various leaves, stems, and flowers from the plants.

He mashed all the herbs together with the mortar and pestle, then added a few drops of a dark liquid that was labeled with a *hazardous* symbol on the front. He tossed the mixture into a pot and boiled it down until it made a thick brown slurry, then transferred his new concoction into the empty vial.

Ceyden sloshed the mixture around, a devious smile tugging at his lips as he imagined all the uses such a little vial of poison could have. *Someone could get in a lot of trouble if found carrying this at the wrong time... What a shame that would be.*

A little trouble was just what he needed. Just a little incentive for Thea to realize how badly she needed him in her life. He wanted to laugh as he imagined his plans playing out. Thea running into his arms, crying her pretty little heart out as she begged for his help. Soon, so very soon, she would finally be his. Even the king of Underworth's bride wouldn't be able to match the beauty of his future wife. It seemed only natural that the son of such a powerful divine one received only the best.

Ceyden fired up his magic again, allowing his blood to heat as the orange glow in his eyes reflected in the vial's glass. He just had one more thing to find now.

Find Theodore Aynna.

chapter six

As Andro descended into the labyrinth, only one thought crossed his mind.

I should have done more...

He should have destroyed the divine ones while he had the chance. They were no better than him—they didn't deserve their polished pedestals or glitzy crowns—and when he finally had the chance to prove it, he tripped over his own pride.

As the *former* record keeper of the labyrinth, he was all too familiar with the rituals that took place before he descended into the enchanted prison. His red tunic itched like it was made of fraying straw, and his stomach already growled, despite the large breakfast he'd been fed as his last meal.

It seemed ridiculous that he was being condemned to the labyrinth, despite the fact that he technically *didn't* get anyone killed, but he should have... He was so close to wiping fourteen divine ones off the face of Fairmyth.

As a garden nymph, he was constantly stepped over by the divine ones above him. They may have tried to pass him the occasional smile or offer him *kindness*, but it all meant nothing. Not when they could have easily given him more: more power, more authority, more coin, more *anything*! Being less wasn't an option for Andro anymore... And the only way to become more, was to topple those above him.

Or get them sent into the labyrinth.

Andro stepped onto the final step, and no sooner had he done so, a large *whoosh* of wind blared behind him. He whirled around, but the wind was gone as quickly as it came, and so were the stairs...

Great.

He carried onward, surprised at how well he could see the path without even a hint of light in the dark tunnels. It wasn't so scary; just a big dumb hole in the ground for the divine ones to toss away anyone they wanted. If only they had been able to experience the same treatment.

As the labyrinth's record keeper, Andro had a very important job that not even the creator of the labyrinth, Lord Malik, had a hand in. Andro signed off the names of each man or woman who was sentenced to the impermeable prison. It was a simple task, one that only required a flick of his quill, but it held more power than anyone ever realized.

Just by writing the wrong name—say... the name of a haughty divine one—Andro could send anyone he wanted into the labyrinth's clutches in place of another. He started small, with a lowly divine one who technically worked below him, but could never make his tea correctly. No one questioned it when the guards showed up at her door and put her away for holding. They only sent prisoners into the labyrinth once every two weeks to avoid risk of any old prisoners lingering by the gate to attempt an escape, but Andro couldn't wait.

After his success with the first divine one, he started signing off on even more, dotting his quill with a twisted smile as he slowly cleared out the men and women who looked down upon him. It was too easy, but that was the problem. The sensation of power overwhelmed Andro until he couldn't stop himself from forging new records to send more and more divine ones into the maze.

He had gotten seven women and seven men arrested before the guard finally caught on, and only one day before the labyrinth's gates opened...

I was so close, but I should have done more. So many more...

The labyrinth was warmer than he expected, like a sunny forest with cool air—except, there was no sun, and the air smelled like mildew. The first true shadow caught Andro's eyes, and he realized it was being cast by an old skeleton. Andro tried to follow where the light was coming from, but he couldn't pinpoint any cracks in the ceiling or walls. He knelt by the skeleton, snarling his lip as he gawked at the pitiful scene.

"Pathetic, just giving up and dying like that." He dug through the skeleton's dusty jacket, hunting for anything that could be of use. He found a small knife, with a blade that was no longer than his thumb and

terribly dull. “If I’m going to die in here, I’m going to leave some marks on the so-called beast first.”

Rumor had it, he was a divine one, too, or at least used to be... Some say he was cursed after insulting the king, and others say he was the reason the labyrinth was built in the first place. After all, you always need a cage to keep a monster in. Either way, if he was a divine one, he deserved to die just as much as any other did.

Andro continued onward, stopping each time he found a corpse or skeleton to hunt for anything that could be of use. For the most part, the bodies were clean, but occasionally, he found the scraps of possessions, like sketched maps that all looked about as confusing as a child’s drawing of noodles. He tossed the maps aside, deciding he didn’t care nearly as much about escape as he did his vengeance. Marking up the beast would be enough.

He wandered for hours, hunting for the beast and anything else with a heartbeat. He tried running through the tunnels, creeping around the corners, but no matter how he traversed the labyrinth, everything seemed to look the same.

Until he spotted something.

“A plant?”

Andro glanced around, ensuring no other person was around before approaching the strange growth. Sprouting from the labyrinth floor was what appeared to be a rosebush. It was low to the ground, with fat, dark green leaves, wicked thorns, and massive blooms that looked far too heavy for their stems. The roses were blood red, each one perfect and full.

“What? How are you alive?” Andro reached for the bloom, barely touching the petals as he tried to let his magic connect. Typically, his magic didn’t mesh well with flowers. He was more of a brambles and succulents sort of nymph—really anything that was prickly and didn’t need a lot of care. However, the thorns on the rose allowed him a small connection to the plant, and it was... odd.

His magic felt tainted the second he touched it, like a poison was shooting up his veins and burning until it numbed his throat. He pulled the knife he’d collected from his pocket and sliced the bloom off from the stem.

“What are you?” He studied the rose closer, but the second he pulled it, the magical connection he’d felt began to drain, and the rose started to wilt at an unnatural speed. Petals fell from the bloom, first darkening, then shriveling into a dark brown and floating to the ground until the stem turned rotten in his hand. “Fairmyth...”

“Who dares pick my roses?”

A booming voice echoed behind Andro, and he dropped the remnants of the flower, spinning around with a sharp gasp. Standing before him was a monster like no other, one that not even his pride could imagine taking on. “Y-you...”

“Do you know what you could have done!?” the beast roared, flashing his fangs at Andro as he saw his panicked gaze reflect in the monster’s axe.

Did picking flowers hurt the beast? If that’s the case...

“Shall I do it again?” he asked with an arrogant lift of his chin. “It only seems right that we suffer together, *beast*.”

Andro dove for the bush, snatching another bloom by the stem and preparing to sever it from the leaves. Before he could cut another rose, a massive hand snatched his wrist and yanked him back from the bush with the force of a bear.

“I don’t need your help to suffer,” the monster growled, his eyes piercing through Andro’s soul as he raised his mighty axe. “But I can’t allow you to destroy my roses!”

Then he swung the axe.

chapter seven

“Good morning, madame. I’m sorry to disturb you, but I was hoping to inquire if you were in need of any more servants on your staff?” Thea asked with her brightest, *please hire me*, smile.

The woman eyed Thea up and down. She was an older divine one, probably in her late seventies, with a touch of magic keeping her youthful glow hanging on by a short thread. Her wrinkles were honestly quite tasteful, and her eyes were already bright, as if her magic was fluttering with her thoughts. She was tall, with slender arms, a pointed nose, and one of those glares that made you feel like you’d done something wrong the moment you opened your mouth.

“I typically only take in recommendations from my housekeeper,” the woman said as she tapped one of her ringed fingers against her chin. Thea tried not to ogle at the gaudy jewels. This woman may have been just as wealthy as Lord Malik, but her estate wasn’t nearly as impressive.

Maybe she’s a minimalist? I certainly wouldn’t mind working for someone who’s a bit more grounded.

“I see.” Thea cranked up her smile. “While I’m not familiar with your housekeeper, I can assure you that I am bound to make a good impression on her. You won’t find a harder worker in all of Olympia, my lady. I can clean, do laundry, cook, garden—”

“What talents do you possess?” the woman cut Thea off, pressing her lips together as she looked deeper into Thea’s eyes.

“Pardon, my lady?”

“*Talents*,” she repeated. “What magical gifts can you offer my household? Are you a garden nymph? Divine one, perhaps?”

Drat...

“Uh, no, madame,” Thea said with a dry swallow. “I’m afraid I don’t possess magic, but I can assure you, I’m just as useful as any—”

“No magic?” the woman scoffed. “Be gone, dear. I have no use for needy mortals in my house. If you want a job, go back to Mortalia where your kind is more welcomed.”

“But I—” She slammed the door in Thea’s face, causing Thea to jolt as she stood alone on the front stoop. “But I can’t...”

Thea left the stoop with a sigh, digging out a scrap of paper from her pocket to mark another name off of her shortening list. She only had three homes left on this street that might be wealthy enough to take on a random servant, but not wealthy enough to care about her origins.

She thought back to Lord Malik’s estate, wondering for the hundredth time if she had made a mistake by letting the job go so easily. Her family didn’t blame her one bit when she told them in detail about Ceyden’s advances and his insistence on making her his bride. They were all happy for her to have moved on from such an uncomfortable work environment, but in truth, Thea could see the fear behind their eyes. None of them knew what would happen now.

Without Thea’s paycheck, food was going to become even scarcer than it already was, and their father still had to discuss the details of their tax payments.

Which should have been today...

Thea winced as she remembered Father dusting off his best coat and hat for his trip to the courthouse today. She could only hope that Lord Malik would show mercy on their family for residing on his land. What would they do if he requested a large sum of money? Would he demand it be paid right away? Kick them off his property? Arrest Father?

She shuddered at the thought. While the judicial system in Olympia was strict, it wasn’t cruel. Well, usually... There was the mysterious labyrinth to consider, though that was a punishment reserved only for the worst of the worst. Murderers, unrepenting thieves, power-hungry monsters, those were the types of men that were tossed into the labyrinth’s walls, not kind older men who couldn’t afford a proper home.

Still, I’m close to the courthouse. Perhaps I can stop by and offer Father some support.

Thea started down the streets of the capital, trying not to notice the smells of the street vendor’s roasted pigs, ripe tomatoes, or yeasty loaves

of bread. Her stomach roiled inside her, but she had gotten rather used to ignoring it's chattering. She kept to the sides of the road, as most servants did in the bigger parts of the city. Even though she wasn't currently employed, it just felt natural. The middle of the road was reserved for divine one's carriages or parading couples who were flaunting their expensive new outfits. Thea used to love watching the carriages roll through the city as a child, but now that she'd seen what that kind of wealth did to most divine ones, she only found it irritating.

As she neared the courthouse, the crowds grew denser, until they stopped moving entirely. People clustered around the courthouse grounds, trying to get closer, but not being rash enough to actually shove their way to the front.

What's going on?

Thea had no problem being rash. She pushed through the crowds, making her way to the front of the onlookers without even a lick of guilt. When she made it to the front, she could finally understand what everyone was gawking over. There was an arrest happening. Half of the court guards were huddled around a hunched-over man, while the rest were busy keeping the crowd at bay so they didn't interfere. Thea couldn't see the entire scene from her position. She weaseled between another couple until she got a different view, then nearly felt her eyes bug out of her head as she recognized one of the men on the courthouse steps.

Lord Malik.

"Put him in chains!" the lord commanded as he shook a vial of black liquid toward the apprehended man. "No mortal attempts to poison me and gets to walk away from it!"

Poison? A mortal?

One of the guards took the vial from the lord and popped the cork off the top. He sniffed the contents, and his entire face twisted up from the putrid smell. "It certainly smells like poison," the guard confirmed as he passed it to the other guards to inspect.

"He was spotted trying to pour it into my cup!" Lord Malik shouted, his head completely red from the neck up. "All because he didn't want to pay his taxes!"

“Please, my lord...” A voice begged from behind the wall of guards, and Thea’s heart thudded so hard in her chest that she nearly fell forward. “I would never dare to harm you.”

“F-Father?” Thea squeaked just as the guards shifted so she could see her father’s broken expression and pleading eyes.

“Then explain the venom you just tried to slip me?” Lord Malik growled.

“I have never even seen that vial until now, my lord,” Father said, his crinkled eyes crushing Thea from the inside out. “I swear, I came only to settle my debts with you.”

“Settle them indeed.” Lord Malik stormed toward him, but the guard stepped in front of him before he could lay a hand on Father. “You thought ending my life would rid you of your dues! Well, I’m afraid your debts have just increased, *tenfold*.”

“Father!” Thea called out into the chaos, her voice exploding out of her before she could control it. She raced forward, pushing past the guard to meet Lord Malik eye to eye. “My lord, please! This must be some sort of mistake. My father would never hurt a soul. You must have him confused with someone else! Where would he even get such a poison?”

The guard flanked Thea, preparing to drag her away from the scene before she could become anymore involved.

“You...” Lord Malik narrowed his eyes on Thea, then held up his palm to stop the guard from dragging her off just yet. “I know you. You’re that maid who recently left my service. How convenient that you left my household just days before your father attempted to kill me.”

“What? No!” Thea said.

“Theabelle! Go home, don’t get involved with this!” Father shouted from behind her, his voice knocking on her like the pounding on an iron door. She couldn’t just leave him. Not when none of this could possibly be his fault.

“You heard your father,” Lord Malik said in an oily tone that slid down Thea’s spine. “Leave, before I decide to let the guard arrest you, too.”

“But he’s innocent!” Thea cried. “What proof do you even have that it was him? Did anyone even see him with the poison?”

“Of course,” Lord Malik scoffed, as if insulted that he would have ever made such a claim against her father without any evidence. “He was seen uncorking the poison beside my cup.”

What? But that doesn’t make any sense. Father would never try to poison Lord Malik.

“By whom?”

Lord Malik motioned for a man to step out from the crowd, and Thea didn’t even have to look to recognize the chilling aura of the man she had last abandoned in his manor. Ceyden stepped forward, a sly, but nasty smile pulling the edges of his lips as he feigned a sympathetic sigh.

“My own son,” Lord Malik said. “Ceyden witnessed the entire thing.”

chapter eight

Angered wasn't the right word.

Despised, repulsed, absolute unfiltered enragement? That was close, but came nowhere near the level of disgust she felt toward Ceyden in that moment. He planned this. There was not a doubt in her mind that the vial being passed around by the guard belonged to Ceyden, and that this was all tied to her leaving him in the dust only a few days back.

I knew he was a brat, but I never realized he could be a monster as well...

"You..." Thea's voice rumbled with anger, vibrating her throat and curling her toes as she fought the urge to punch him in his perfect teeth.

"Hello, Thea," Ceyden said with a fake sympathy that only rattled her further. "I'm so sorry you had to see this. I was planning to come tell you the heartbreaking news in person. Perhaps we should step aside and let the guard deal with this mess while we talk in private?"

Thea bit her tongue so hard she tasted blood, barely managing a nod as she glanced back one final time at her father, who was now being bound in chains. This was so wrong, but he had better believe they were going to *talk* about it.

"Yes," she hissed between her grinding teeth.

Ceyden guided her around the back of the courthouse, removing them from prying eyes and giving them a dangerous amount of privacy. Thea's father may not have been an attempted murderer, but Thea was certainly considering becoming one now that she was alone with Ceyden.

"Here we are," Ceyden said as he confirmed they were fully away from prying eyes and ears. "Now that we're alone, why don't—"

Smack.

The sting across Thea's palm was more satisfying than any other moment of her life as Ceyden reeled back, his shiny eyes dazed and

blinking, a red imprint of her hand brightening his cheek.

“What have you done!?” Thea asked, storming forward and causing Ceyden to stumble back a step before she could land another hit. “You framed my father because *I* refused to marry you! Didn’t you!?”

“Now, T-Thea,” Ceyden stammered, his hand still pressed to his swelling cheek. “I know this entire affair may have come as a shock to you, but there’s no need to—”

“A shock!?” Thea smacked her fists to her sides. “How about a betrayal? Ceyden, what you have done could get my father sent into the *labyrinth*. I know you and I have had our differences, but that man out there is innocent, and kind, and has *five* daughters to look after. Did you even once stop to consider how this could impact them, too?”

Ceyden opened his mouth to reply, but Thea wasn’t done yet. She was no longer his servant, and she refused to be a puppet as well. This had gone too far, and her family was not going to pay the price for it.

“And all for what!? To get back at me for refusing your advances?” Thea kicked at the dirt. “Why Ceyden? Why would you do this to me if you ever cared about me at all?”

“I’m here *because* I care!” Ceyden’s voice boomed out of him, pressed in for too long before finally being set free. “Thea, I don’t know what you’re *insinuating*, but all I did was report a crime that I witnessed.”

You filthy liar...

“I bet your father was worried he wouldn’t be able to pay for his taxes, so he thought this was the only way to protect you and your sisters,” Ceyden continued.

“You *dare* claim my father would have attempted to poison yours?” Thea seethed, her blood boiling hotter than the depths of Tarteron.

“I can only claim what I saw happened,” Ceyden said, his voice growing dark as he inspected his cheek in a reflective puddle before meeting Thea’s eyes again. “However... I suppose I could have always seen something else...”

I knew this was coming.

“What you saw was falsified,” Thea said.

“Perhaps...” Ceyden agreed. “Perhaps I mistook another man for your father? It’s hard to say for sure. I suppose I could think clearer if I wasn’t so troubled with your recent rejection of my advances.”

“You pig,” Thea spat.

“Easy now. That’s not very ladylike, now is it?”

“Fine, you *swine*.” Thea itched to hit him with more than a slap. He needed a few teeth knocked loose to really understand how she would always despise him for this.

“Theabelle, I understand you’re upset—”

“Upset!? No, Ceyden, I’m not upset.” Thea stomped in front of him, forcing his eyes to look into the fire raging in her unmagical soul. “I was *upset* when you threatened my job. I was *upset* when you didn’t take no for an answer. Now, I’m unreasonable. If you take my father from me, there is nothing stopping me from clawing your eyes out.”

Ceyden met Thea’s gaze, his eyes flickering with his magic, as if he was trying to overpower her with the reminder that he was divine. It wouldn’t work on her, but it did plenty to fuel Ceyden’s confidence.

“You still have your sisters,” Ceyden said in a frosty tone that simmered a touch of Thea’s flames.

“They’re resourceful, they don’t need me,” Thea said, trying to force herself to believe it was true. Her sisters were intelligent. They could get by without her, but the bigger question was, could Thea forgive herself if she did something that would force them to support themselves?

Like murder a young divine one...

“Is that so?” Ceyden asked, stepping back as he glanced around the corner of the courthouse, smirking at the scene he had so deviously crafted. “Just like your father handled himself today? Thea, you never know what kind of misfortunate can fall upon a family. I’d hate to see something happen to anyone else...”

“Is that a threat!?” Thea couldn’t believe what she was hearing. What Ceyden was implying was even more horrid than the pits of Tarteron. He could make the king of the dead look like a saint.

“A threat? Of course not, Theabelle. This is an *offer*,” Ceyden said in a calm voice that sounded like a charmer who was trying to tame a viper.

“I know I’ve already extended this opportunity to you, but I don’t think you were in the *position* to fully appreciate it last time. Marry me, Theabelle. Marry me, and I will protect those sweet little sisters of yours and pull them from the streets before any other mishaps can befall your family. As for your father... Perhaps I saw him try to poison my father’s drink, or perhaps I was mistaken.”

This couldn’t be real. Divine ones had always had nasty ways of getting what they wanted, but Thea had always assumed there was still some humanity within them. The term *divine one* felt like such a pretty mask when *wicked one* fit so much better.

“You can’t make me marry you, Ceyden,” Thea said firmly, her legs shaking with pent-up rage.

“You’re right, I can’t,” Ceyden agreed, his eyes darkening as he tilted his chin to glare at the quaking mortal. “But I can’t save your father, either. Only you can.”

The rattle of wagon wheels alerted Thea, and she pushed past Ceyden to look back around at the front of the courthouse. She could barely get a glimpse of the wooden cage, mounted on wobbly wheels as a horse mounted by a knight pulled it through the crowd. Thea’s stomach dropped, her entire world spinning as she locked onto her father’s shrouded form, chained at the bottom of the cage.

“No...” Thea cupped a hand over her quivering lips. She wouldn’t cry, not while Ceyden was watching.

“You know where to find me when you’ve made a *real* decision,” Ceyden brushed his lips past her ear, her skin crawling from the touch. “The labyrinth gates are scheduled to open in three days. I’d recommend finding me before then.”

chapter nine

Thea walked home in silence. The sky was a glorious blue, the birds carried a sweet song in the air, and the breeze rustled the grass like it was an ocean of green, but Thea felt like she was walking through the fires of Underworth. Was there even fire in Underworth? She didn't know, but the pain and misery that seemed to follow the stories of the great king of corpses seemed to line up flawlessly with her own suffering.

What was she going to tell her sisters?

When the tiny cottage came into view, Thea's stomach knotted as she thought about how Lord Malik was the technical owner of even this tiny scrap of property. What if he decided to kick them all out now that Father couldn't pay off the taxes? Would they truly end up on the streets? Ridiculed for the rumors that have already gotten Father arrested?

This is all Ceyden's fault. If our home burns, it's because he lit the match.

"Thea!" Clara was the first to notice her sister. She was sitting outside washing a few puny-looking potatoes in a basin. "Girls! Thea is home!"

A second later, the creaky door flung open, and Thalia, Belinda, and Dora all ran outside like a stampede of wild horses. They all dropped what they were doing, racing up to Thea without a second to lose.

They know...

"Thea, what happened!?" Clara asked, her eyes already glassy. "Where's Father? Why are people saying all these terrible things?"

"P-people?" Thea blinked.

"It was all over the city!" Dora said. "Everywhere we went, chatter about a new offering for the labyrinth's monster was being discussed. I didn't think much of it at first, but then I heard Father's name brought up!"

“Me, too,” Thalia said with a quivering lip. “Someone said a man named Theodore tried to poison Lord Malik today at the courthouse. That’s where Father was going today, but he wouldn’t... he couldn’t...”

“He *didn’t*,” Thea said firmly, kneeling down to meet Thalia’s wide eyes. “I promise you, what you heard about Father’s crimes isn’t true. He never tried to hurt anyone.”

“Well, of course he didn’t. We know he would never do such a thing,” Clara said. “So why isn’t he here?”

Thea’s heart sank as she realized there was still plenty to the story her sister didn’t know. She didn’t want to tell them that Father’s arrest was her fault, but she couldn’t keep the truth from them, either.

“The guards have reason to believe he’s guilty.” Thea took in a long breath. “Because they have a witness claiming he saw Father try to poison Lord Malik’s cup.”

“What!?” the sisters cried in near-perfect unison.

“But how!?” Belinda gasped. “Who would have claimed something like that?”

“Ceyden.”

The second Thea spoke the name, a tense quiet fell over her sisters. That was all the explanation they needed to understand what truly had occurred. The reactions were mixed among the girls. Belinda and Thalia started sniffing, Clara looked absolutely lost, and Dora was already turning red from the neck up.

“Let me guess...” Dora growled. “Ceyden offered to help Father—”

“If I agree to marry him,” Thea finished.

Clara seemed to snap out of her trance, shaking her head slowly, then faster, as she finally let an unladylike squeal echo up from her throat. “That beast! He can’t possibly expect Thea to marry him by blackmailing Father!”

“H-he really got Father in trouble?” Thalia asked. “But why? I thought he liked Thea.”

“No, he’s *infatuated* with Thea,” Dora corrected. “And he’s a spoiled brat who thinks he can have anything in the realm he wants just because

his daddy is the keeper of the labyrinth. Well, I have a daddy, too, and he's not going to sit in a cell for a minute longer!"

Dora stormed off, but Thea caught her by the arm before she could march into Olympia's jailhouse. "Dora! Where do you think you are going?"

"To tell the guard that their witness is a big ugly liar, of course!" Dora tried to pull her arm free, but Clara rushed to help Thea hold her back.

"Dora, they'll never listen to us," Clara said.

"Why not!? They listened to a hardheaded divine one, didn't they?" Dora huffed.

"Yes, because he's a *divine one*," Thea reminded her. "And his father is favored by King Zion. Going there will only give them an opportunity to arrest one of us, too. Lord Malik already tried to accuse me of being involved in the poisoning plot."

"H-he did?" Belinda gasped.

"Yes, but I think he only meant to scare me off," Thea explained. "This isn't something we can stop. Not without... without Ceyden."

Thea felt sick for even considering the thought, but what other choice did she have? Could she really leave Father to suffer for a crime he had no hand in?

"Hold on, you're not *actually* considering Ceyden's offer, are you?" Clara asked with wide eyes. "Thea, he's a monster!"

"I know!" Thea pressed her hands against her forehead, wishing she could tear her face off until she was a hideous skeleton that no divine one would ever go to any trouble for. "But our father *isn't* a monster, and he's about to get thrown into a maze with one."

Thalia gasped. "T-the labyrinth?" Silent tears spilled down her cheeks, twisting Thea's heart into a knot. "They wouldn't do that... Father never hurt anybody."

"Yes... but look who he offended," Dora said with a bit lip. "Thea's right. Without Ceyden's help, Father is..."

She couldn't say it; none of them could. How could they possibly think of the unimaginable happening to someone they loved so dearly?

How can I sit back and just let it happen?

“Father will be fine,” Thea said in a low voice. “I promise. I won’t let anything happen to him.”

“Hold on a second, Thea.” Dora put a hand on her shoulder, her grip frightfully strong. “We all know Father wouldn’t want you to marry Ceyden. *None* of us wants you to marry Ceyden, no matter how he threatens us.”

Except that’s just it. The threats won’t stop with just Father.

Thea thought back to the determined look in Ceyden’s eyes and the greedy aura that showed no acceptance of getting anything less than his desires. She should have known quitting wouldn’t be enough to sever her connection with him. Ceyden’s divine gift was designed to let him find whatever he wanted. His mind was wired to hunt for what he desired, no matter the cost, and satisfaction only came when he claimed his prize.

This doesn’t end until Ceyden’s hunt ends with it.

“I know what Father wants.” Thea swallowed, trying to hide the shake in her voice as she held her head high so her sisters couldn’t see her shrivel. “But I know what I want, too. I want you all to be safe, and I promise to make that happen.”

chapter ten

The courtroom smelled like cedar and iron, like a cold box that was sealed from the outside. Thea and her sisters took up an entire row of seating, each one in painful silence as they waited for their father's trial to begin.

This was the first time they had seen him since he was arrested yesterday. The cottage felt so empty without Father lounging back in his rocking chair, snoring the night away. He looked tired. His eyes were dark with bags, and Thea could see the red abrasions under his chains. She considered telling Thalia and Belinda not to look, but when Father spotted them, he gave each of his daughters a brave smile that was more crushing than healing.

I'll save you, Father. I promise you, I will.

Lord Malik came in only a few minutes later, taking his place at the front of the courtroom with a bored look that said he would rather be anywhere else but here. It was even more infuriating seeing that her father's trial was an inconvenience to him, while it meant everything to Thea and her family.

Ceyden trailed in behind him, sticking close to his father so he could give his testimony when the time came. The only question was, what testimony would he give...

His gaze latched onto Thea, and she could see the tiniest glimpse of his magic flickering in his gaze as he used it to pinpoint her location. She didn't wait for him to come pester her; instead, she nodded to her sisters and then calmly rose from her seat. She made her way to the corner of the courthouse, already sensing Ceyden's shadow looming over her as he followed her to the discreet corner. Once she had distanced herself enough from the crowd, she turned around to face the horrid beast who had shredded her life with his haggard claws.

“I was wondering when you’d come find me,” Ceyden said, his eyes still buzzing with the lingering effects of his gift. “Have you made a decision? There’s still time for me to change my story.”

Thea’s shoulders tensed as his smile picked at her like an old wound. He made it sound so casual... As if her father’s life was nothing more than a business arrangement or a matter of paperwork. That *she* was nothing more than a deal that needed to be sealed away with a simple testimony.

He wants me to trade my life for my father’s, and he knows me well enough to know that I’d do it, too.

“Yes, I’ve made a decision,” she said numbly, her palms clammy as she avoided meeting his eyes for a moment. She could hear his heart pumping, beating with the anticipation of her answer and his opportunity to finally claim her.

An opportunity he will never get.

“I will never marry.” Thea lifted her chin, taking in his shock like a blissful drink of the finest wine. “I shall remain a maid my entire life, and no matter what you do or who you threaten, I will forever remain out of your reach.”

Watching him deflate felt so good. Her chest swarmed with heat, flooding with pride as she watched his jaw drop and the first touch of anger tinge his ears red. She loved her father and her sisters more than anything in Fairmyth, but they loved her, too... They would understand why she chose this for herself.

“You...” Ceyden seemed at a loss for words, as if he had an entire soliloquy worth of anger to spout but couldn’t funnel the sheer amount through his pressed lips. “Your family is going to suffer for this, Thea... You know that, don’t you?”

He’s right...

“I know,” Thea said with a small fracture running through her heart. “But the man who causes that suffering isn’t going to be permitted anything else from me or my family. Goodbye, Ceyden.”

Thea started back for her seat, her feet feeling light as she stepped away from her last opportunity to save the life she had cherished, despite its downfalls. Ceyden snatched for her wrist, but she wasn’t going to play

into his hand any longer. She'd made her decision, and it didn't include him. She yanked her arm free, not even bothering to look at him as she made her way back to her seat with her siblings.

"Thea?" Clara leaned over to look at Thea's steadfast expression. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Thea said, sounding calmer than she felt. "I am content with my decision. I hope you all can forgive me for what happens next."

"Of course, we forgive you," Dora sniffled. "No one should have to marry a man they despise. I only wish..."

She didn't finish. Her voice was clogged by her tears as she looked back at Father. Thea looked over, his warm eyes fixated on Thea's cold expression. He knew. He had to have. He could always read Thea with a single glance. Thea prepared for the pain, for the heartbroken look that would forever torment her for choosing to be selfish.

Except, he looked so proud...

He wasn't smiling, but the watering in his eyes and the firm hold he had on Thea's eyes was filled with nothing but love and pride for his daughter's choice. He knew what his freedom would have cost Thea, so he'd given up on his freedom altogether.

Don't give up yet, Father...

The trial began with Father giving his testimony before the judge. Most of the divine ones in the crowd chattered or whispered through his telling of the tale, making snarky remarks or ogling his rough-looking daughters. Thea sat tall through all of it, and her sisters followed suit, showing only support for their father as he proclaimed his innocence as truly as he was able.

Next was Ceyden...

If fire could be perceived through words, the entire building would have been up in flames. He spoke only ill of their father, claiming he had seen him pour the poison with his very own eyes. He told the story of how his daughter had been fired from his service, and how his debts to Lord Malik would have been a contributing factor to his attempted murder. He had it all mapped out... the perfect story to sentence Father to the worst possible crime. The only thing that even the judge seemed to struggle to

believe was how the kind, soft-spoken man in chains... could be the villain. But how could he deny it with such a story?

If there was someone else to take the blame.

“Before we move on,” the judge said to the crowd as Lord Malik finished his own statement after Ceyden. “Are there any other witnesses whom—”

“Me, Your Honor.” Thea stood from her seat, her voice loud and clear as she gathered the attention of the entire courtroom. “I wish to speak on my father’s behalf.”

“You?” Lord Malik scoffed from his seat. “Your Honor, this is a waste of time. The girl is the criminal’s daughter. She’ll have nothing of use to add.”

“Thea...” Clara tugged at her arm. “What are you doing?”

“I have plenty to add, Your Honor,” Thea continued, undeterred by her sister’s questioning. “Because my father is innocent.”

The crowd erupted into laughter, and even Ceyden seemed amused by her attempts to be bold. She didn’t flinch, and instead kept her expression hard as she met the judge’s eyes with the resilience of a caged animal.

“I will let the girl speak.” The judge nodded. “What proof do you have that your father is innocent?”

Thea stepped forward, claiming the front of the room with stiff legs and a loose tongue as she projected her confession to every ear in Fairmyth. “No proof, Your Honor. Only a confession.” *I’ll never marry, but I won’t let Father die for it, either.* “It was I who forced my father to use the poison. I did it to retaliate for being released from Lord Malik’s service. The guilt should be placed solely on me. I will accept any punishment in my father’s place.”

chapter eleven

Gasps and whispers flooded the courthouse, the loudest coming from Thea's sisters. She tried not to look back at them; she didn't want to see the horror on their faces.

They need their father more than they need me. If this is what it takes to save him, then so be it.

"Theabelle!" Father exclaimed from behind Thea. "What are you doing? Don't tell such lies!"

"Don't try to cover for me, Father," Thea said sternly as she looked back at her father's panicked face. He was being restrained by the guards, every muscle in his body fighting to get to her and pull her away from this mess. "We both know you're innocent. Do we not?"

Father shook his head violently, his greasy hair flying in front of his eyes. "Yes, but—"

"And I admit guilt, Your Honor," Thea said to the judge. "It was me who was released from Lord Malik's estate, me who held a grudge against his family for forcing me to leave, and me who concocted the poison in the vial."

Ceyden's eyes widened, pure shock bleaching his face as his mouth opened, but no words made their way out. He looked like he'd been kicked in the stomach, and in truth, Thea enjoyed the sight. She would rather die in the labyrinth than be his trophy wife, and that fact seemed to chew Ceyden up and spit him right back out.

Like I said. You'll never have me, Ceyden.

"Is this true? Would you swear by it?" the judge asked Thea.

"I would."

"Thea!" Father cried.

“H-hold on just a second!” Ceyden stumbled to his feet, his breath not catching up to his words as his eyes flickered with pulsing magic. “Theabelle didn’t craft that poison!”

“Oh?” Thea spun around, her heart blazing in her chest like a raging fire as she glared at the divine one. “Then who did?”

He went mute. His teeth clattered together as he realized that proving her innocence would include exposing his guilt. He couldn’t stop this, not without stopping *all* of it.

“I... I still think it was crafted by Theodore. She’s only trying to steal the blame!” Ceyden stammered.

The judge looked back at Thea, his twisted brows considering this thought while Thea remained cool and collected. She’d prepared for this. She’d cleaned every inch of Lord Malik’s mansion. Not only had she recognized the vial that was found at the scene of the crime, but she knew exactly what herbs would have been in the greenhouse where it was located.

“It was me, Your Honor,” Thea said with a dip of her head. “The vial was palm-sized, slightly murky from repeated use, and corked with a yellow plug. The contents are only dangerous when ingested, but it should have had a strong scent of mint when inhaled.”

The judge blinked, then turned to the nearest guard, who gave him a subtle nod. Thea felt her shoulders relax the smallest bit. In truth, the mint part was a guess. But considering that nearly half the apothecary’s herbs were run over by invasive mint plants, it made sense that Ceyden would have grabbed more than a few sprigs while concocting his *poison*.

“The girl speaks the truth,” the judge announced, earning another round of whispers from the crowd. “She is the guilty party.”

“Seize her!” Lord Malik declared, and the guard obeyed after a confirming nod from the judge.

“No!” Father cried, his chains rattling as he tried to tear free from the guards. “Thea please! Don’t do this. I’ll go in your place. You should be free to live! Please don’t take her away!”

Thea turned to face her family before the guards could pin her in place. Her sisters were all crying, each too muffled by their pain to even

utter so much as a goodbye. Thea smiled at them, doing her best to reassure them as the shackles snapped around her wrists. The icy metal scraped her skin, weighing her down as if it was already dragging her into the maze hidden beneath Olympia's surface.

"I love you," Thea said, her heart throbbing as she watched the thick tears roll down Thalia's cheeks. "Take care of each other, okay? And don't give up until you make it back to Mortalia."

"T-Theabelle..." Father's cracked voice nearly shattered Thea in two, yet she still forced herself to meet her father's eyes. He looked so hollow, like a piece of him had been torn away and snapped into iron shackles. "Thea, please..."

"They need you, Father," Thea said in the strongest voice she could muster, swallowing her own round of tears. "We all do."

"We need *you*, too," he said in a wobbly voice.

Thea bit her lip, then forced another smile. She had to be strong. This was the last time she could be a big sister to them and a strong daughter for her father. "I'll always be with you. Every time you see a rose bloom, that'll be me smiling back."

"Thea!" Belinda cried, her eyes rimmed in red as she tried to reach out to her eldest sister.

"Be strong, girls," Thea said with a raise of her chin. "Remember to always be brave when facing your beasts."

Her sisters did their best to swallow their tears, each lifting their head and standing tall as they tried to mirror Thea's strength. Just seeing them attempt it caused Thea's heart to lift, and her shackles to lighten. They'd be all right without her; in fact, they'd be stronger for it.

"You... you can't be serious." Ceyden's voice was quiet among the crowd, but it was hard for Thea to miss when she'd grown so accustomed to shivering with every sound of it. "You really would rather... But you, you can't—"

"Watch me," Thea growled under her breath.

Watch me choose a beast over a brat.

"Theabelle Aynna." The judge raised his voice, standing from his seat as he gathered the attention of the entire courtroom. "Given you have

pleaded guilty in the attempted murder of Lord Malik Ashoran, I hereby have no other choice but to grant you a punishment of equal severity.”

Thea braced herself for the crack of the gavel, hardening her heart as she waited for the words that would effectively end her life forever. She tried to search for any regrets in the back of her mind, but she couldn’t find a single one. She had chosen her death over an imprisoned life, and nothing about it felt wrong.

Goodbye, Olympia. I’ll visit your roses soon.

“No!” Ceyden’s voice cracked just a second before the gavel, but he was too late. Thea’s fate was sealed.

“Theabelle Aynna, I hereby banish you to the labyrinth.”

chapter twelve

The body dragged across the stone floor with a soft scuffle. The beast dropped it next to the others, the pile a little bigger than the last disposal. He hated this part of the job.

He twisted the ring on his finger, glancing around at the dimly lit walls to see if he sensed any other trash that needed to be sent away. That seemed to be it. No more bodies were left lying around the labyrinth other than the few skeletons the beast kept around to warn the newcomers about their fate. He often tried to motivate the prisoners to let him end their lives early and cut their suffering short, but some were more stubborn than others. The skeletons scared a lot of the stubborn out, but not all of it.

He glanced down at the stack of corpses, snarling at the few who had held on to their pride until the bitter end—they were the type that he hated the most. Watching other men waste away just reminded him of his own fate in the labyrinth. With each passing day, and new prisoner, he felt more convinced that escape was nothing more than a carrot on a stick. The hope had tasted so sweet when he was younger, but now he hated carrots.

A spark of blue flame flickered against the stone wall, drawing the beast's eye as he watched it fan to life and wrap into a ring of fire.

Right on time.

The circle was about the size of a door once completed, filling up the entire wall as the center went up into a puff of smoke and revealed the magical portal. King Hayden, the divine one who ruled over Underworth's graveyard, had the power to create portals in any corner of Fairmyth to use to collect corpses. There were three places a person could go once they had passed, but they were all within Underworth's borders. Two of them were for honored citizens, divine ones, and those who deserved to be remembered, even in the smallest regard, while the third was reserved for only those who needed to be forgotten.

The pits of Tarteron.

The portal descended straight into darkness, with barely even the pit's cliff within view. The scent of smoke and fire filled the tunnels, tainted with the bitter air of Underworth. One by one, the beast hoisted the bodies through the portal, watching them tumble straight down into the mass grave where they would forever be forgotten.

He used to look forward to this time since it was the closest thing he got to a change of scenery. However, the more he performed this particular job, the more morbid it became. The grave he tossed all the corpses into would likely become his own one day...

No one wanted to remember a beast, and there was little chance of him ever being cured of the curse that kept him trapped in the shadows. He tossed in the last body, watching it fall into the dark void with a vile tug in his throat.

How many times had he thought about speeding up the process?

It was so tempting to follow the corpses... To jump into the pit and be free of the prison, the curse, and the life that tethered him to grief. It would have been so easy, too. At least, that's what he thought when he first tried it...

Underworth was a cursed land that manipulated time for all those who stepped within its borders. For divine ones and those gifted with magic, it allowed them to live longer. But for those who were mortal, the land sapped away their time in exchange, shortening their lifespan with every breath they took. Apparently, it had an odd effect on cursed beasts, too...

The one time he'd tried to step through the portal, it hadn't let him. He wasn't sure why. It could have been due to the labyrinth's magic, or even the curse in Underworth, but not even his claw could breach the portal.

It was cruel that way. Those who entered the labyrinth were the scum of Fairmyth, but they at least had a way out. As for the beast, he was forever trapped within its walls with his only escape being an unmeasured amount of time. He could always starve himself and lock away the resources that allowed him to live, but he couldn't bring himself to go that far. Tateron would have been a swift end, and anything else was just another layer to his curse.

The portal fizzled away into a puff of smoke, leaving behind the stale smell and thick air. The beast watched the image disappear until it returned to the familiar walls of the cave. For a long moment, he didn't move. He stood in the empty tunnels, the only living soul in the entire labyrinth. Sometimes he would run when he was alone, other times he would scream, but today, he just wanted to exist.

That was hard enough on its own.

His finger warmed beneath the golden ring, signaling that someone was messing with the labyrinth gates. They were preparing to open them... Looks like his peace wouldn't last much longer. He wondered how many men would be sent in this time. Maybe three? Or just one?

He picked up his axe, the shiny metal blade catching his fangs in the reflection as he tossed it over his shoulder, preparing to deal with the newcomers upon their entrance.

Whoever they are, they better not touch my roses.

chapter thirteen

The cell was hot and smelled like sweat and ale. It didn't take long to figure out why. The jailkeepers apparently offered the prisoners with labyrinth sentences a final pint of ale to drink to wash down their woes before descending the cave. Thea politely declined.

What she couldn't get out of, however, was the dress code. All those who entered the labyrinth were required to wear a bright shade of crimson. Rumor had it that the beast wandering the maze was attracted to the color, so it ensured the prisoners would be dealt with efficiently. Others rumored that the blood-red color was meant to strike fear into the hearts of any onlookers, reminding them why they should never dare defy the divine ones or royals.

It was rare for women to be sent into the labyrinth, so it took a little time for them to find a dress in Thea's size that matched the required shade of red. The gown was simple, with a long skirt, sleeves that stopped at her forearm, and a modest neckline. A piece of black cord was tied around the waist, giving the dress a vague shape. The leather bands she used to tie back her hair were confiscated, along with her shoes and other personal belongings. She kept her dark hair tucked behind her ears, the soft waves curling around her face from the heat in the cell.

The night was long, and she didn't remember sleeping any, but she did remember the feeling of safety that came from sleeping behind an iron door. That was the last night of security she would ever have. Once the labyrinth gates were opened, Thea could kiss any sense of safety goodbye.

Yet she was ready.

She didn't want to go into the labyrinth. She knew what horrors awaited her. But she was proud of her choice. It was a choice that *she* made, and not one that someone blackmailed her into choosing. Her sisters would be safe from any further manipulation from Ceyden, and her father had already been set free. Her life was a small price to pay for her family's

freedom. She just hoped that one day they would forgive her for leaving them behind. She hoped she really could visit them in the roses once the labyrinth took her life. No one could ever help but smile when looking at a perfect rose.

“Aynna,” the guard called through the bars, shocking Thea upright from the straw-covered bench she’d used as a bed. “You have a visitor. Keep it brief.”

“A visitor?” Thea tilted her head. “I don’t understand. I thought labyrinth-bound prisoners weren’t permitted visitors.”

The guard didn’t respond, he just stuffed the key into the lock and clicked the door open. When it swung to the side, Thea understood why *this* visitor had been permitted to break the rules. He had a nasty habit of always finding her, no matter where she hid.

“Hello, Theabelle,” Ceyden said in a cracked voice that was a far cry from his usual cockiness.

“What are you doing here, Ceyden?” Thea spat with a fold of her arms. He had some nerve showing his face to her now. “The verdict has been made, and not even you can change my sentence now. Did you just come to gloat about how I’m going to die for refusing you? Well, save it, because I—”

“I came to apologize, Thea,” Ceyden interrupted, his voice sharp and tense like he was biting back pain at the same time. Thea’s jaw dropped, her head spinning as she tried to imagine how the word *apologize* could possibly come out of a Ceyden-shaped mouth. “I’m sorry... for all of this.”

Am... am I already dead?

“Pardon?”

“Don’t make me say it again,” Ceyden said, finally sounding a bit like the Ceyden she knew. He groaned, pressing his thumbs to his brows as he took a moment to collect himself. “Look, I know things went too far. I shouldn’t have accused your father of the things I did, and I shouldn’t have pressured you so hard into marrying me, but I won’t apologize for loving you, Thea.”

Loving me?

“You never loved me, Ceyden.” Thea shook her head. “People don’t blackmail the ones they love.”

“Well, what else was I meant to do!?” Ceyden snapped, his fists clenched to his sides, and for a moment, Thea could have sworn his eyes were misty. “What could I have possibly done to make you mine, Thea? I tried *everything*, yet even after my attempts, you chose death over me!”

“I chose *freedom*,” Thea said sternly. “That wasn’t something you could offer me, Ceyden.”

“You don’t know that.”

“And I never will.” Thea folded her arms, her heart pattering behind them like a caged hummingbird. “You chose to corner me, and I chose my only way out. What’s done is done, Ceyden. Whether you loved me or not, you will never have me. My life belongs to the labyrinth now. No more second chances.”

No more anything...

Ceyden gnawed his lip, his eyes dark and thoughtful as he glanced back at the prison door, ensuring the guard was out of earshot. When he looked back, his eyes were glowing. He was searching for them or someone else. When he seemed content with the distance of their whereabouts, he let out a long sigh.

“What if you did have a second chance, Thea? Would you take it?” he asked with an intense stare.

A second chance?

Thea narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about a way out of the labyrinth.”

Thea’s breath caught in her throat, and the fluttering in her chest went quiet. A way out of the labyrinth? But such a thing couldn’t exist. That would defeat the entire purpose of the maze being used as a prison. Is this some sort of trick to get revenge?

“Ceyden, I...”

“If you could escape the labyrinth,” Ceyden continued, his eyes still glowing as he checked over his shoulder, “would you finally agree to marry me?”

“Marry you? Ceyden, what are you getting at?”

He stepped forward, and to Thea’s surprise, he took her by the hands. His grip was cold and clammy compared to the warmth her skin had absorbed from the cell, and her skin still crawled whenever he touched her.

“I know it was wrong of me to blackmail you, Thea. I’m sorry about that. I’m sorry I put you in this position.” Ceyden tightened his grip on her hands. “I couldn’t sleep last night thinking about you in the labyrinth, so I used my gift to look for something instead.”

“F-for what?”

“A key,” Ceyden continued, his voice growing hushed. “I wasn’t even sure one existed, but the more I pushed my magic, the closer I got to finding one until...” He released one of Thea’s hands, reaching into the inner pocket of his coat until he pulled out a bright red rose. “This.”

“A flower?” Thea blinked. It was certainly a beautiful bloom. The petals were a rich red, and the bloom was as full as a stem could physically support. The dark green leaves contrasted with the bright petals that almost seemed to catch the light in the same way Ceyden’s eyes did.

“The key,” Ceyden claimed. “I found it hidden in my father’s study. If my magic is right, it’s the key to the labyrinth, and potentially your chance to escape it.”

Escape the labyrinth? Is that even possible?

Thea studied the flower closer, narrowing her eyes on the shiny petals. The petals weren’t just reflective; they were sparkling with magic... Whatever this rose was, it was somehow infused with power.

“I... I don’t understand. How can a rose be the key to escaping a maze?” Thea asked.

“I have no idea,” Ceyden shook his head, “but I’m hoping it will make more sense once you’re inside the labyrinth. I know I placed you in this position, Thea, but this is my chance to pull you out of it. I’m sorry I was cruel, but I only did it because I needed you in my life. I *still* need you in my life.”

He pressed the rose into her palm, and her skin sparked as the stem made contact. This was absurd. How could an enchanted rose ever free her from the all-powerful labyrinth?

It couldn't.

Thea looked up at Ceyden, wondering if he'd confused his magic with false hope as one final attempt to have her as his bride. It was sad, really. He still hadn't accepted that she was lost to him. That was fine, though. This gave her one final chance to bargain.

"How about I make you a deal," Thea said, her fingers still latched around the rose but not fully pulling it from Ceyden's grip yet. "I'll take the rose and make every effort to escape the labyrinth. *But* I will only marry you on one condition."

Ceyden nodded before Thea even said anything. "Name it."

"You must swear to provide for my family the moment I step through the gates," Thea said with a bold lift of her chin. "Even if I never escape, you must see that they never go cold or hungry. If I do escape and find that they are well cared for upon my return, then I'll marry you. If not, then my escape will mean nothing to you."

Thea swallowed hard. Never in her life did she think she would agree to any terms that involved a marriage with Ceyden, but she also had no doubt that she would perish in the labyrinth. This would ensure her death wouldn't leave her family with nothing.

"I agree to your terms," Ceyden said as he pulled his grip away from the rose, leaving it in her palm. "But you must swear to try every way possible to escape. Don't leave me, Thea. Use the rose and find your way back to me."

He shifted forward, closing the distance between them so their faces were only inches apart. Thea didn't love the way his breathing sounded or the way his eyes were so close they were blurry, but he needed to believe she could fight her way back to him. This was the final gift she could bestow upon her family.

"I swear," Thea whispered as she tucked the rose safely inside her sleeve where it would be hidden.

"Good," Ceyden said softly, brushing his fingers along Thea's cheek, causing a cold shiver to run across her skin. "Then let's seal our promise."

He pulled her chin to his, brushing their lips in a sloppy kiss that squirmed against Thea's mouth. She shut her eyes and counted to five

before pulling back, trying to avoid a shudder as he matched her eyes one final time. Fortunately, he didn't force her to do any more than the simple peck, though she could tell he longed for more. At least he had *some* respect for boundaries.

The guard clicked the lock back open, and the door swung into the cell with a loud screech. "Time's up," the guard said stiffly. "It's time for the girl to go."

Go...

Ceyden tightened his grip on Thea's hand, and she gave it a reassuring squeeze back so he would let her go. She stepped in front of him, facing the guard with a steady breath as she held out her hands to be shackled.

"I'm ready."

chapter fourteen

The gate was at least twenty feet tall, made of black iron that looked like it had been once set ablaze and left to rot in the char. Behind the gate was a stone staircase that vanished into endless darkness, like it led straight to the pit of Tarteron instead of a maze.

And in some ways, that's exactly where it led.

There were few onlookers for Thea's descent. She wasn't a divine one or a known nymph, so the people who showed up to watch her punishment be given were mainly those who had too much time on their hands. Rows of people stood to the sides, watching as Thea trudged between them all with her clattering chains.

The gates were wide open, like the jaws of a beast ready to snap her inside and swallow her whole. She'd looked into the labyrinth gates before—most people had. The curiosity of the unknown always compelled eyes to look, but today, she wanted to look anywhere but the dark cavern. She stared up at the sky, trying to take in the last moments of warm sunshine and fresh air before it was confiscated from her forever.

"Thea..." Dora sobbed in the lineup of onlookers, tearing Thea's eyes from the clouds. "We love you, Thea."

All her sisters had worn their best dresses. Their eyes were all red from tears, but only Dora was having trouble keeping it together. They stood united and strong, with Father standing in the center of them with a broken look that could only be described as heart-wrenching.

His eyes were red, too, but he didn't look like he was holding back any more tears. Thea appreciated that—it helped to see him be strong. She knew this would be painful for them, but it was their best chance at a better life. Ceyden would see that they got back on their feet, and the girls would have Father to cling to when things got rough. They were going to be all right, and that was all that mattered now.

Thea met the eyes of each one of her family members, giving them one final brave look that they could remember her by long after she was gone. Thalia sniffled when she met her gaze, but she stayed so strong and swallowed back the tears.

They're going to be all right.

As for Thea, she was going to be gone.

She stopped in front of the open gates. The guards held her chains back, so she had to halt in front of the darkness. The air smelled musty by the labyrinth, like an old tomb that hadn't been opened in a century or so. The judge from the other day stepped in front of the entrance, and not far to his left stood Lord Malik, with Ceyden tucked behind him to watch.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the judge announced. "This young woman, Theabelle Aynna, has confessed guilt to the attempted murder of the divine one with us here today. By Olympian law, such a crime must be met with only the cruelest of punishments. Imprisonment in the labyrinth. Let today serve as a reminder to all who bear witness that our king and our laws are not to be trifled with. May Fairmyth have mercy on her soul."

"May Fairmyth have mercy," the crowd chanted.

The judge stepped aside, leaving the gates wide open for Thea's grand descent. The guards unlocked her shackles, and the heavy metal clattered free from her wrists. She rubbed the raw skin, but only had a second to do so before being prodded by a guard to step forward.

It was time.

She took a deep breath, looking once more at the sun, then back over at Ceyden with a gripping look that held a thousand words behind it. She may have despised him for all he was worth, but she was also entrusting him to keep his word and care for her family. He met her eyes and gave her a strong nod, sealing his silent promise and making Thea's next steps feel so much lighter.

One step after the other, she moved closer to the shadows. Her toes dipped into the darkness, then the hem of her red skirt, then her legs, her torso, and her eyes were slowly swallowed up by the cursed shadows that would become her final home. She stopped at the first step, taking one final breath of the clean surface air before descending into the depths.

She stepped down.

The second her feet left Olympia's soil, the gates swung closed behind her. The crash of metal made her jump, but she didn't dare turn around. She didn't want her last look at the sun to be through iron bars. It was time to accept the darkness.

Down she went until the glow of the sun was nothing more than a memory in her dark vision. She felt for the wall, steadying herself as she felt for each step before committing to putting her weight on it. Everything was so dark. Not like normal darkness when you could still sense movement, but like a pure pitch black that made it difficult to tell which way was up. Still, she continued, holding her breath each time she felt for another step.

She didn't remember shutting her eyes, but it only made sense, considering that it felt more familiar than this absurd darkness. She kept climbing down for what felt like an eternity until she finally began to wonder if this was all the labyrinth truly was, just a downward staircase into a mass grave. She tried not to think about it, telling herself there had to be at least something at the base of the steps. She felt around for the next step with her foot, but this time, the ground was solid.

Her eyes were still closed, but she shifted her foot a little farther forward, her heart pounding as it came across more solid ground. This had to be the bottom. She peeled her eyes open, preparing to be met with the terrifying void of darkness, but to her surprise, she could actually see.

There was no light source that she could locate, yet she could make out the cave walls, ceiling, and floor. The rock was a dark gray, but it seemed to have a natural glow to it, like some sort of silver light was reflecting off the stone, yet she couldn't see where it was coming from.

How odd...

She turned around to look back at the black staircase, but when she looked over her shoulder, it was completely gone. Only another stone wall with the same strange glow stood in its place, like there had never been a set of steps in the first place. She always knew the labyrinth was crafted with magic, but it still shocked her to see how alive the cave already was. The tunnels forked in front of her, and she chose to go left without a second of hesitation. She wasn't sure where she was going or what she was

looking for, but standing near the entrance felt like a bad idea when there were rumors of a beast wandering through these tunnels.

Can there really be a beast down here? How would it survive with no plants or sunlight?

She thought the question in her head, yet the labyrinth still seemed to respond to it. She turned a corner and sucked in a sharp breath as she spotted something she would never have anticipated being inside the cursed prison.

Nestled in the stone, like it was Fairmyth's riches garden, was a perfect rosebush.

"What...?" Thea knelt down beside the blooms, checking to ensure they weren't fake or some sort of darkness-induced illusion. "Where did you come from?"

The blooms were full and rich in pigment, with nasty thorns warning away anyone who dared get too close. Thea reached out for one of the flowers, itching to touch one of the velvety petals and see if it felt as real as it looked. She only reached her fingers a few inches out before she felt something warm brush against her sleeve—or *in* her sleeve.

Ceyden's rose.

She'd nearly forgotten about his strange key that had bought her family's protection. She pulled the bloom out of her sleeve, worried she had crushed it during her long descent into the cave, but it looked just as full and flourished as it did when she first tucked it away. In fact, it looked better...

The petals were brighter, with an odd glow emanating from the center. It was similar to the way the labyrinth walls were illuminated. There was no source of the light, yet light existed, Was this a sign of magic?

The flower felt warm in her grasp, almost like it was alive and buzzing. Had it done this all along? Or was it because she had taken it out of Olympia's sun? Thea didn't know much about magic as a simple mortal, but still... She couldn't help but feel like the rose was trying to communicate something to her...

Can such a prison truly possess a key?

She looked back at the rosebush, wondering if it was somehow connected to the enchanted one in her fingers. She blinked a few times at the bloom, noticing something had changed in the short time she had looked away from the bush.

The roses... were they always wilting?

chapter fifteen

A prisoner has entered the labyrinth.

The labyrinth walls buzzed with the new energy, tensing the beast's muscles like he had smelled something foul. He wasn't in the mood to deal with a prideful scumbag today. He'd end their life quick and enjoy his solitude for a little while longer.

He attached his axe to his back, tightening the carrying strap that rested snugly over his shoulder. The wooden handle thumped against his spine as he walked, digging into the thick, calloused skin underneath his fur. The axe was practically an extension of himself after all the years he'd made use of it. The maze provided for him fairly well, but it never gave him any weapons. After spending years fighting off the prisoners with stones and a grizzly roar, he decided to craft his own weapon with the discarded metal breastplate from a fallen prisoner and a large splint of wood that a prisoner snuck in as a spear. It wasn't anything fancy, and it needed repairs often, but it was sharp enough to end a life without so much as a wince of pain.

He twisted the gold ring on his finger, allowing the labyrinth to guide him through the tunnels to the newest visitor. He hoped this one would be compliant. He wasn't in the mood to chase down a sweaty man through the tunnels, but he would if he had to. The silence was far too appealing.

The labyrinth didn't seem to share the sentiment of his haste, and took him down extra tunnels and passages, dragging out his walk. The beast sighed; the maze could be so finicky at times. It was truly alive in some ways, with an agenda of its own and often a bit of attitude thrown into the mix. The creator's magic was truly something extraordinary... extraordinarily annoying.

"What do you want?" the beast huffed at the ceiling. "Why won't you just take me to the prisoner?"

The walls remained silent—they always did—yet he still sensed a tug toward a different tunnel. He rolled his eyes and walked a few feet in the direction the labyrinth called him toward. The walls glowed happily when he complied, highlighting a specific patch of stone that housed one of the beast's precious rose bushes at the back of a dead end.

"I'm here. Now what do you—"

Wait...

He saw it then. The maze wasn't trying to draw attention to the wall, but to the roses sprouting from it. The beast rushed over to the blooms, his heart thudding in his chest as he knelt down beside the flowers. They were wilting... Only slightly, like they had gone a few days without a proper drink, but it was still more than he had ever seen.

"No..." the beast whispered, his claws shaking as he gently reached out to brush one of the flowers. The tender touch caused a petal to flutter to the ground, stopping the beast's heart as he stared at the blood red petal on the dirty ground. "The roses... They can't die. They've never died before."

Panic pushed the beast to his feet. He stormed through the tunnels, completely ignoring the pull of the labyrinth as he hunted for another patch of roses. Even without the labyrinth's guidance, it only took him a few moments to come across another bush. He hurried to look at the blooms and felt his stomach plummet as he noticed the exact same wilt in the petals.

"Who's done this...?" the beast growled. "Have they been poisoned? Someone must have disrupted them..."

The new prisoner.

"Take me to the intruder," the beast demanded to the ring, his chest tugging as the labyrinth floor rumbled in response to his request. "Now!"

The magic ring obeyed his command, though he could sense it was reluctant to. He followed the guiding glow of the tunnels, his hooves clattering with each step. *Whoever this man is, he better pray that he didn't have anything to do with my roses. There were fates worse than starving in the tunnels.*

Those roses are all I have left. If something happens to them...

He couldn't think about that. They were still alive for now; he just needed to figure out what was making them wilt. He raced around the corners, his heart pumping with each turn as he felt the magic drawing him closer to the prisoner.

There.

The bright red color all prisoners wore caught his eye, blurring his gaze with his own red-hot fury. He reached for his axe, the metal reflecting the dark red color as he crept up behind the unsuspecting... woman? He froze.

Why was there a woman in the labyrinth?

He was looking at her from behind, but she looked younger than most prisoners. She was easily two feet shorter than him, though his beastly stature left him at a towering height, and her dark hair flowed down her back in long tresses that looked like they deserved to be braided into a crown. She was slender, but almost too much so, like she had already been in the maze for too long and was in need of a proper meal. Her skin was tanned from being in the elements, as opposed to being light and untouched by the sun like the pompous nymphs who found their way into the tunnels. He couldn't see her face, but he could tell by her posture that she was already braver than most who found themselves in the tunnels.

She stood tall, chin raised, and hand on her hip as she seemed to study something in her other hand. Something red and vibrant...

A rose.

All the curiosity the beast held melted into blood lust as he narrowed his eyes on the perfect bloom. How dare she pick one of his roses... That must be why the others were wilting.

"You..." the beast growled, his voice thunderous despite the low tone.

The girl whipped around, her hair fluttering over a pair of onyx eyes and soft features that stunned the beast with their grace. She gasped, her rosebud-pink lips parting as she clutched the full bloom to her chest and stared straight into the beast's eyes. Not his fangs, not his horns, but his eyes...

His chest tightened, but he didn't let the girl's beauty soften his anger. The rosebush behind her was in the same horrid state as the others. This

was her fault. She did this to his roses.

“What have you done?”

chapter sixteen

The beast...

Thea froze solid, unable to look away from the striking pair of gray eyes that met her in the darkness. She could see the fur, the horns, and the fangs, but it was his eyes that stunned her. They glistened like silver, catching the light off of his blood-stained axe and the strange glow of the rose. They looked so... human.

She couldn't say the same for the rest of him. He was almost three heads taller than her, his shadow engulfing her far more than Ceyden's ever could. She knew she should have been afraid, but the shock overran the fear as she repeated what he had said to her.

"P-pardon?" She squeaked.

"I said..." the beast snarled, shifting his axe so Thea could see herself reflecting in the grim blade, "*what* have you done?"

So he can speak...

Thea didn't respond at first, still trying to piece together *what* this creature was. He sounded like a human, and his eyes were full of soul, but when she took a step back, there was no hiding the terror that filled her bones. He was bigger than a bear, with sharp claws wrapped around the weapon he was already aiming toward her head. He must be the prison's executor... but why would he bother to speak with her if he had only come to kill her?

"I... I was sentenced to the labyrinth, for—"

"Not that!" He snapped, stomping his foot—or *hoof*—into the ground. "The rose! You plucked it from my garden, didn't you?"

His garden?

The enchanted rose warmed in her grasp, and she looked down at the petals that were already far more vivid than the ones on the bush. Could he not tell the rose came from a different place?

“No! I didn’t pluck any roses.” Thea shook her head frantically.

“Don’t lie to me!” The beast took a daunting step forward, dropping his axe and let the blade scrape against the ground. “I’m ugly, not a fool. I can see the flower in your hands!”

“I beg your pardon, but I don’t recall calling you ugly or a fool,” Thea said sharply, his tone digging into her brain the same way Ceyden’s always did. Maybe it was because he was a literal beast and Ceyden was a figurative one, but for some reason, Thea thought they sounded similar. “I already told you. I didn’t pluck any of your roses.”

“Is that so?” the beast narrowed his eyes until they looked like silver slits of moonlight. His claws tightened around the axe, clearly not convinced by Thea’s story yet. “Then explain the rose in your hand. You have three seconds. Two...” He lifted his axe.

“I brought it with me!” Thea said, staggering back a step as the heavy blade lifted over her head. “It was given to me before I entered the labyrinth!”

Thea shut her eyes, preparing for the swish of the blade and the dull sting that would sever her neck from her shoulders, but it never came. The beast had paused, but only barely, with his axe still high in the air.

“Brought it with you?” he scoffed. “No one brings flowers down here. You’re lying.”

“I most certainly am not!” Thea crossed her arms. She wasn’t going to die being called a liar. An attempted murderer, sure. But not a liar.

“You can’t expect me to believe that you brought a *rose* into my labyrinth at the same time my flowers start wilting!?”

“I can expect you to believe the words of a fellow person!”

He tensed, like the word *person* caught him off guard. Thea hadn’t even thought about it while she was shouting, but he wasn’t really a person... was he? He certainly argued like one.

“I don’t believe the words of a criminal,” he sneered, prepping his axe again for the swing. “No one is sent here for being *honest*.”

He’s got me there... though not for the reasons he thinks.

She hadn’t been entirely *honest* when she took her father’s place, but that didn’t make her a sleazy criminal. The true monsters were the ones

still above the surface.

“You don’t know anything about me,” Thea said. She pressed the rose to her chest, letting the warmth pass through her like it was a tiny flame.

The beast held his axe high, his eyes fixed and empty, clear of any emotion before he took his swing. He seemed to be good at his job. Within a blink of his eyes, he was already detached from Thea, looking at her like a job that needed completed instead of a person he was striking the soul from.

“No one knows anything about me either,” he said in a cracked voice that felt out of place with his detached gaze. “Yet, you’ll be treated far more kindly than I will. I promise to make this quick.”

Thea didn’t shut her eyes. She wasn’t going to hide from death when she willingly walked into it. This beast would have to watch her perish.

Hopefully, I’ll see my sisters from beyond.

The axe swung, and the warmth on her chest doubled. The rose gleamed, but it was more than a glow this time. A small blast of light emanated from the bloom, flashing in the beast’s eyes and causing him to drop the axe only a few inches from Thea’s arm.

“What...” the beast gaped. His eyes were wide, and his hand shook where it gripped the axe. “But... how?”

Thea blinked at him, still trying to process that she hadn’t died. She looked back at the rose. “What...?”

She didn’t get to finish her question. The beast staggered back. His eyes locked on the rose for one final moment before he turned and ran.

chapter seventeen

What was that?

The beast ran through the tunnels, not even paying attention to the route he took as he wandered further and further away from the girl. His heart was pounding like a stampede that was racing over his thick ribs. He felt hot, like his blood had been heated and his fur had gotten thicker all over his skin.

That rose... Why did it affect me like that?

The beast was no stranger to magic. He utilized it every day in the labyrinth to navigate his surroundings and keep track of the prisoners inside. Even his ring was enchanted to let him be guided through the tunnels when the maze wasn't cooperating. It was always a warm sensation, like a fuzzy drink that flowed through your blood and prickled the fur on the back of your neck. He barely even noticed it anymore, but whatever came off of that rose was so much stronger...

It hadn't harmed him. In fact, it only seemed to flash him with light, yet he couldn't ignore the intense tug that pulled in his gut when he stared into the gleaming petals. It was the same feeling he had when the labyrinth wanted his attention, as if the magic was alive and trying to communicate to him.

It couldn't be...

He shook his thoughts straight and changed his course to head for the center of the labyrinth. The maze guided him with ease, illuminating the tunnels he needed to follow, guiding him to his pitiful excuse for a home. When he arrived, the wall opened up, revealing the hidden cave that was only accessible to him.

He stepped inside, and a rumble echoed after him, but he didn't have to turn around to know that the wall was closing behind him. The familiar scent of fresh running water and ripe greens filled his flared nostrils as he

walked past his garden and headed straight for his makeshift bed in the corner.

Bed was a generous term for the pile of red shirts, trousers, and cloaks he had collected over his lifetime. Other than the root vegetables and the roses that grew in the depths of the maze, he had limited supplies to make anything else he needed—hence why he made sure to scavenge everything he could off the bodies he sent to Underworth. He only picked the clothes that were free of blood stains, of course... or at least, he thought so, but it was hard to tell when everyone wore red. He did try to wash them first...

He leaned his axe against a stalagmite and went to work digging under the compressed layers of his bed. He thumbed through the old fabrics until his claws brushed across the parchment he hadn't looked at in years. He pulled the parchment out, and the yellowed paper sent a tingle through his skin as he recalled all the late nights he had spent rereading it as a child. He had the contents memorized, but he still had to be sure.

My darling boy,

I wish I could have saved you sooner, but please accept this final gift from me. Alongside this treasure, I want you to know that there is a way things can be as they once were. I don't know how, but I know that your curse is tied to the labyrinth, and the labyrinth is tied to a rose. The curse can be broken by this rose, but not by you—by someone sent to you. It's dangerous for me to even know that much, but I hope it can be of help to you someday.

All my love,

Mother

The letter was left with him whenever he was first placed in the labyrinth, along with the golden ring that helped him survive as a mere toddler in the maze. The ring guided him to what his heart wanted most, and as a child, it led him to water, food, and safety, time and time again. Later, it even guided his mind through the letters in the note so he could learn how to read. Now it just guided him to what he wanted to remove. His heart wanted peace and quiet, and every once in a while, it wanted to be near the roses.

The roses...

He'd always thought the letter was talking about one of the roses that grew in the labyrinth. Though, now that he reread the note, he could see that it was specifically referring to a single bloom as opposed to a bush of them.

All these years, he'd tended to and guarded the blooms that yielded him nothing but false hope. What if he had been wrong all along? What if the true rose he was in need of was the one that stunned him only moments ago?

He looked down at his ring, twisting it around his scarred knuckles as he felt the magic warm against his skin. He could feel it working, trying to guide him to what his heart wanted more than anything.

It wants the rose. Or at the very least, to know more about it.

He hated his heart for wanting it. For too long, he'd let himself believe that his curse was breakable and that a life outside of the maze could be waiting for him. He thought he'd finally freed himself from such foolish desires, but magic didn't lie... No matter how badly he wanted to be reasonable, part of him believed this rose could be the key to his curse.

The beast stood, dusting off his trousers and snatching his axe back from the stalagmite. He needed to find that girl.

chapter eighteen

Ceyden signed his name on the property document, sealing the final arrangements for the Aynna's family housing. It felt ridiculous to hand out charity to a mooching family when he couldn't even have Theabelle in his arms, but on the chance she found her way out of the maze...

I need her to see that I upheld my end of the deal.

He folded up the document and placed it in an envelope before sealing it tight with his signet ring. The cottage he picked out for them was nothing rich. Just a small four-bedroom home with a modest kitchen, parlor, and tearoom. It was one of the unused properties on his father's land, so it was easy enough to sign over. He'd still need to send occasional funds over to ensure they were being provided for, but that wouldn't be too challenging, either. He just hoped it was all going to be worth it...

And that was what my magic claimed it to be.

He blinked his power to life, letting the magic simmer through his veins as his eyes illuminated a warm shade of orange. He tried to focus on Thea's location, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to get his magic to bind to her; but he could tell his magic was trying... If he asked his gift to locate something that didn't exist, like a unicorn, or someone who had perished, then it wouldn't activate at all. Thea was lost within the labyrinth walls, but she was still alive.

Come back to me, Thea. I'll be waiting.

A loud crash echoed in the next room over, causing Ceyden's magic to retreat back into his veins. He jumped from the sound, then rushed over to find that it had come from his father's study. The door was wide open, so he didn't bother knocking, stepping over smashed pieces of furniture, papers, and shredded books. The study looked like it had been ransacked by a bear, and standing in the center was his father, tearing his desk apart by the nails.

“Where is it!? It was here!” Father barked as he kicked a loose piece of wood free from the desk, searching through every possible cavern in the furniture he could find.

“Father!” Ceyden rushed to his side, stopping him before he could shred his hand on a splinter-riddled piece of wood. “What’s gotten into you? What are you looking for?”

“A piece of my work!” Father yanked his hand back, his eyes wild with his magic flicking haphazardly. “It’s been missing since yesterday and it still hasn’t turned up, but I had it hidden in my study in a place no one should have been able to find!”

He turned to start rummaging through his shelves, knocking off anything that he had left behind with his first sweep.

Something that no one should have been able to find?

“What... what did this item look like?” Ceyden asked, his muscles tensing as he decided he likely already knew the answer.

“What’s it matter? The blasted thing is missing and if I don’t find it, then I—” He froze, his lips still parted mid-thought as he adjusted his focus onto Ceyden with a slow narrow of his pupils. “Why do you ask, Ceyden? Do you know something about this?”

Ceyden swallowed. “I-I’m not sure. I just wondered if perhaps my gift could—”

“If your gift could help find it?” Father took a step closer, kicking aside a broken shelf and something else that sounded shattered. “Or if your gift *already* found it.”

His rose.

“I...”

“Where is it, Ceyden!?” Father snatched Ceyden by the shoulders, digging his nails into his skin and giving him a rough shake. “Where is my rose!?”

“Father!” Ceyden tried to pull away from him, but his grip was like iron. Ceyden should have known better than to come near Father at a time like this. If that rose truly was the key, Father would do anything to protect it and keep his precious labyrinth under its lock.

Which means it might get Thea out after all.

“Tell me!” Father pushed him back, causing Ceyden to stumble over a shuffled pile of books. “Where is my rose!?”

“R-rose?” Ceyden gasped, partially from nearly stumbling to the ground and partially because Father had just confirmed what he hoped to be true.

“Don’t play dumb with me, boy,” Father hissed. “You’re the only one who could have located it. My puzzle locks are foolproof unless someone with divine magic can use their powers to look for a way inside. The servants couldn’t have unlocked the rose, so it had to be *you*. Where is it!?”

Ceyden clenched his jaw, looking for a way out that wasn’t available to him. What would Father do if he found out he gave it to a labyrinth prisoner? “I... I don’t know. My magic can’t locate it anymore. I don’t have it.”

“You don’t have it?” Father repeated, his skin turning red as he processed what that could mean. “You gave it to someone... That girl, the one who used to work here... Fairmyth, Ceyden! You didn’t?”

Ceyden stayed silent, but that was all his father needed to confirm his guilt. The rage that followed was unlike any Ceyden had ever seen. If he had been any closer, it might have even manifested into a curse, but he backed up against the wall as far as he could until the heat radiating from Father finally dwindled.

“You foolish, insignificant, worthless excuse for a divine one!” Father cursed as he flipped over his desk, smashing it even further into pieces. “Do you have any idea what you have done? What this could cost me!?”

“Father, please. Calm yourself.” Ceyden raised his hands cautiously. “It’s not like it’s in the hands of a murderer. I learned later that Theabelle was framed for her crimes, she’s not—”

“I don’t care if she’s a bloody saint!” Father snapped. “*No one* leaves the labyrinth. That’s what makes it so powerful. If even one little girl slips through the cracks, then the king will lose all faith in me and my maze!”

“Come now, Father. That seems a bit—”

“Silence!” Father glared at Ceyden, cutting him off with a piercing flash of his eyes. “You’ve said enough. I should have you sent into the

labyrinth after her for what you've done."

Ceyden flinched. He wouldn't actually do that, would he? He was his son.

"I should have destroyed that blasted flower when I had the chance... keeping it was only asking for something like this to happen, but that blasted divine one made me fear destroying it would lash back at me." Father snatched a piece of blank parchment from the clutter on the ground, then kicked through the desk rubble until he found his quill and a spilled pot of ink. "Now I'll just have to destroy it in a less convenient way."

Destroy the rose?

"How?" Ceyden asked. "The rose is in the depths of the labyrinth now."

"By sending in someone after it, of course," Father sneered as he placed his parchment against the wall and started scratching out a note with his quill. "Innocent or guilty, that girl cannot be permitted to escape my prison. I don't care what it takes. I'll send a dozen men into the maze if it means it will keep that girl from escaping."

"Father!"

"Quiet," Father snapped. "Or you'll be the one I send in after her. If you wish to remain in my house, then you shall never speak of the rose or what you *believe* it can do to anyone ever again."

But Thea... she's supposed to come back to me.

"What... What are you going to do if she does manage to escape?" Ceyden asked, his stomach knotting as he watched his father finish writing his letter and fold it up under his arm.

"If she escapes?" Father repeated, his eyes still glowing with a wicked gleam of his magic. "Then I'll find her before Zion ever finds out anyone escaped, and I'll wring her neck myself."

chapter nineteen

Thea considered sleeping on one of the rosebushes, since the leaves and petals looked far more inviting than the floor. However, there were still the thorns to consider, and she was sure the beast wouldn't take kindly to her coming near his precious roses again. Instead, she cuddled up the best she could in one of the cavern's dead ends, propping up her head on her arm.

She'd had worse nights of sleep before, and at least the tunnels were quiet. The rocky soil shifted underneath her as she tossed, and her growling stomach filled the quiet every few minutes. She dreamt of her sisters, their tear-stained cheeks flashing through her mind and startling her awake after a few attempted hours of rest. She sat upright, her back aching as she did her best to stretch it out. It was strange not waking up surrounded by her sisters—perhaps that's why they were invading her dreams.

She thought back to the tiny cottage they used for shelter and the measly dinners they all had to share. If Ceyden kept his word, they shouldn't have to live like that for much longer. Spending her final days in an enchanted labyrinth was well worth it if it meant they would be provided for.

But how many days would that really be...?

Thea thought back to the moment the beast could have slain her. He'd showed no interest in hearing her out or looking at her as anything more than a pest that needed to be disposed of. She couldn't entirely blame him, considering those who were usually sent into the labyrinth were the worst of the worst. Though she couldn't help but wonder what made him stop when he did.

She looked down at the rose that was resting beside her sleeping spot. It was still as vivid as before, with thick petals, healthy green leaves, and a sweet scent.

“Was it you?” Thea asked the flower, feeling a little silly for speaking to a plant. “Did you somehow stop the beast from killing me?”

The flower seemed to brighten, but Thea couldn’t tell if it was another brush of magic or if her sleepy eyes were playing tricks on her. She brushed her finger across one of the petals, feeling the strange warmth that radiated off of the bloom. It almost had a pulse to it, like the enchantment had its own little heartbeat.

“What are you?” Thea asked. “Are you really a key? Or some sort of divine spell that wards off beasts? I’d say that I’m thankful for your help, but you’ve only delayed the inevitable. There’s a good chance the beast will find me again, and even if you really are some sort of shield, there’s no food down here. I’ll starve to death if he doesn’t kill me first.”

As if to punctuate her point, her stomach growled, aching all the way up her torso as she recalled the measly scrap of bread she’d been fed for breakfast the day before. Thea looked over at one of the strange rose bushes that dotted the tunnels, noticing that the petals looked even more wilted than they had before she’d fallen asleep.

If they could survive in these conditions, perhaps something edible could, too?

There was no sense in sitting around and doing nothing, so Thea dusted off her skirt and started wandering through the tunnels. She wasn’t entirely sure where she was going, but she thought she’d at least *attempt* to gain some bearings.

With each intersecting path, she only went left to try to follow a bit of a pattern. If the tunnels were stagnant, then only going left would ensure that she would return to where she came from if she went only right on the way back. Or at least... that’s what she thought.

The labyrinth seemed to read her movements, cutting her off from turning left by blocking those tunnels with fallen stones, or only veering right so she didn’t have a choice. The rose felt warm in her grasp, as if it was mocking her for trying to outsmart the maze’s magic.

“Is this your doing?” Thea asked the rose tartly as she came across another blocked path. “I thought you were supposed to be helpful? Look, if I die, then you don’t get anyone to talk to anymore. Is that what you want?”

The rose's warmth dimmed.

"That's what I thought. Now, which way is my best chance at finding food?"

She wasn't sure what she was expecting from the rose, but oddly enough, she noticed that the warmth shifted to only the center of the bloom, leaving the left and right sides cold. Curious, she went straight, and the warmth spread across the entire bloom. A few minutes later, she came across another fork, and the rose warmed on only the right side of her hand.

"Go right?" She looked down at the flower, her heart thudding as the flower responded with a warm pulse. "If you say so..."

She followed the rose's instructions without question after that, wondering if it really was guiding her to some sort of freedom or, at the very least, an abandoned sandwich...

After a few minutes, she stumbled across a skeleton, her skin crawling as she noticed the dusty red shirt still hanging off the old bones. She wasn't too interested in inspecting the bones, but looked again when she noticed something growing next to the skeleton.

Mushrooms!

She set the rose down, her eyes drawn to the plump fungus as her stomach growled hopefully. She'd foraged quite a few mushrooms since they'd been living in poverty, but these were unfamiliar to her. Were they edible or poisonous? She looked back at the skeleton.

"Any chance you know if they are safe to eat, sir?" Thea inspected the skeleton with a closer eye. "How did you die? Beast axe or mushroom?"

She looked him over up and down, not finding a single splinter in his bones that would indicate he died from any type of injury. He either starved or ate something that ended him quicker...

"Mushrooms, then." Thea sighed as she picked up the rose. "When I asked for something edible, I had meant something that wouldn't kill me."

The rose warmed in her hand, this time guiding her toward the path in front of her. She let out another long breath, then carried onward, deciding that the rose's guidance was still better than going mad in her own

thoughts. Though... she *was* talking to a flower, so perhaps she was already past the point of madness.

Her thoughts broke when a new sound met her ears, a soft trickling noise that made her parched lips pucker.

Is that... water?

She raced forward, allowing the rose to guide her closer to the sound until she came across an underground spring, trickling in from the wall. It was small, pooling only about a medium-sized puddle on the stone floor and draining into the earth, but it looked clear and the mist smelled fresh.

“I’m sorry I doubted you!” Thea laughed as she tucked the rose into her sleeve to scoop the cool liquid into her mouth. The water was sweet and fresh, and she drank far beyond her fill until her stomach sloshed uncomfortably.

Perhaps this was why the roses could live. If there was water beneath the stone’s surface, that could keep the plants alive, though the lack of sun still perplexed her. Especially when you considered how bright the tunnels were on their own.

A few feet away from the spring was another rosebush, this one still as sad-looking as the others. They always seemed to look worse each time she looked at them, even since she first saw one of the bushes this morning.

“Are you connected to these somehow?” Thea asked the rose. The flower went cold in her palm as she drew near the wilting blooms. “It’s almost as if you keep growing brighter as they grow weaker. I wonder if they wilt the more that I talk to you?”

Just then, a dark shadow engulfed Thea, blocking her view of the roses and turning her blood cold as she heard a growly voice echo behind her.

“Then perhaps you should talk less.”

chapter twenty

Thea turned, her muscles tensing without permission as she met the beast's sterling gray eyes. They were so intense and just so *human*. She couldn't get herself to look away from them, no matter how much the rest of his physique piqued her interest. She clutched the rose to her chest, holding it up again like a piece of armor in case she had been right about it defending her.

"I was wondering if I'd see you again," Thea said with only a tiny amount of shake slipping into her voice. "Have you come to finish the job?"

She eyed his grim axe, her skin already stinging as she imagined it slicing through her flesh like a pat of butter. It was in his hands, but he didn't have it raised the way he did before, like he was ready to swing but wasn't planning on doing it just yet.

His hands look human, too... aside from the claws.

"Is that what you wish?" the beast asked. His voice still sounded so familiar to her, like Ceyden's, but raspier with an underlying growl that prickled the hairs on the back of her neck. "I will not deny you a swift end, if that's what you desire."

His knuckles cracked as he shifted his grip around the axe's handle. Thea gulped, and the rose warmed like it was trying to reassure her. She wasn't entirely sure what all this flower was capable of, but admittedly, it had given her enough hope that she wasn't ready to submit to the beast's blade yet.

"Actually, I would desire a rather long end," Thea replied. "One where I'm old, gray, and wrinkly, with maybe a thick wool sweater tied around my arms."

The beast snorted, and Thea wondered if it was his version of a laugh, though, he didn't seem to be in a particularly humorous mood.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He glared at her, flashing his fangs with each whip of his tongue. “You missed out on an ending like that when you entered the labyrinth. No one who is sent here is worthy of living out their days.”

“What about you?” Thea asked, her long lashes catching on a fleck of dust and causing her to blink more rapidly. She wondered if it made her look teary-eyed. “You were sent down here, yet you’ve been able to survive. Why do you get to break the rules?”

“Because I never broke them above the surface,” the beast growled. “I’m not a criminal like you.”

“I never said I was a criminal.”

“Everyone down here is a criminal.”

“You’re not.” Thea popped a hand on her hip. “Well, except for when you tried to kill me, an innocent. That seemed rather criminal-esque to me.”

“Innocent?” the beast scoffed. “Innocents aren’t sent here.”

“Oh, so you *were* guilty of something?”

“What? No, I—”

“You were innocent, then?” Thea tapped a finger to her chin, slightly enjoying watching the frustration stir in the fuzzy beast. “But that doesn’t make sense... you said that only—”

“I know what I said!” the beast boomed, causing the cavern walls to rattle around them. “I have committed no crimes, yet I was still banished here, all right? I suppose the *beast* is a special case.”

Thea watched his shoulders tense as he said *beast*. It seemed like there was more to his banishment than he wanted to share, but then again, anyone who looked more monster than man was bound to have personal issues.

“That makes two of us, then.” Thea shrugged. “You probably still won’t believe me, but I’m a special case, too. I never committed a crime, but still chose to be banished here.”

“*Chose?*” The beast blinked at her, his gray eyes lost and thoughtful. “That’s absurd. Why would anyone ever choose to enter an endless maze with a ravenous beast?”

“Well, no one said anything about *ravenous*,” Thea said. “Though I do enjoy mazes.”

“Is this a joke to you?”

“That depends on how inclined you are to actually listen to what I say,” Thea said stiffly. “You already accused me of being a liar once. Why should it matter if I tell you the truth or not if you’ve already decided to dismiss me?”

“You...” He took in a ragged breath, pressing a claw to his forehead as he gathered himself before forming his next retort. “Are you trying to make me want to kill you? Because it’s working.”

“I thought you already wanted to kill me?” She thought back to the moment he had missed her with the axe. “Or... maybe you can’t kill me.”

“I could kill you; that’s not a question,” he said starkly.

“But you didn’t,” Thea said, causing his fur to bristle. “Why?”

“I came to ask *you* questions, not the other way around,” the beast said.

“Questions?” Thea tilted her head. “About what?”

“The rose.”

“I already told you; I didn’t pick it.”

“I’m aware of that now,” he grumbled. “What I’m not sure about is why you would choose to bring it down here, and why it’s affecting my labyrinth.”

“I don’t know anything about your labyrinth,” Thea admitted. “I only just got here, remember?”

“Fine.” He rolled his eyes. “Then at least tell me where the blasted thing came from.”

“Why?”

“Because I asked you to!”

“Not very nicely...”

“You’re my prisoner down here; I don’t have to be *nice*.” He took a daunting step forward, but Thea was used to men throwing their weight around to try to appear powerful. She wasn’t falling for it. He needed

information from her, otherwise she would be dead. She wasn't going to give up her worth to him that easily.

"Well, I don't talk to rude prison guards." Thea folded her arms. "You can either ask nicely or leave."

"What!?"

"You heard me."

"This is not a negotiation!" He smacked his knuckles into the nearest wall, causing dirt to shower from above. "Tell me what you know about the rose, or I'll, I'll—"

"You'll what?" Thea stepped forward, fearlessly closing the distance between them as she stared up at his intense eyes. His pupils shrunk, and he froze stiff as she stopped only inches away from him. It was as if no one had ever dared to approach him before. "Kill me? You'll learn nothing from me then."

Here's to hoping my limited knowledge of the rose is enough to keep me alive...

He stayed quiet, his sharp teeth grinding together as he glared at Thea like she was the biggest thorn in his side that he now had to cope with.

"Please..." he grumbled, his eyes blazing as he barely managed the word. "Tell me what you know about the rose."

Thea blinked, a little shocked he actually complied with her request for him to be nicer. "Sure," she said with a mischievous smile creeping up her lips. "I'll be happy to tell you what I know... in exchange for something, of course."

"What!? But you only said I had to be nice!" he snarled.

"Nice is a requirement, dear beast, but not the only one," Thea tsked. "I don't give out information for free. All I ask in return is some supper."

"Supper?"

"You heard me," Thea said. "You clearly have some sort of food supply if you've survived down here for so long. I want a meal out of it. It shouldn't be too much to ask for what I can offer in return."

One meal won't last me long, but it might give me enough time to find out if there's really a way out of here.

“It’s no wonder a woman like you was sent to the labyrinth,” the beast scoffed. “You’re insufferable.”

Thea laughed. She couldn’t help it. If she had been insufferable, Ceyden would have never forced her to choose the labyrinth in the first place. “You’re quite the catch yourself, but I can still manage sharing a dinner table with you. If you’ll have me?”

She gave him an imploring look, watching as his mind waged war behind those striking eyes. A few moments later, he let out a sigh that had a bit more growl to it than a normal man’s would.

“Fine,” he clipped, hoisting the axe back over his shoulder as he turned away from her. “The labyrinth will show you the way at suppertime.”

Yes!

“Wait!” Thea called to him. “When is suppertime? I have no way to tell time down here.”

“Whenever I say so,” the beast huffed over his shoulder. “And don’t be late.”

chapter twenty-one

The curse can be broken by this rose, but not by you, by someone sent to you.

The beast repeated the lines from his mother's letter in his head, grumbling to himself the entire way back to his hidden cave. It couldn't possibly be *her*; she was about as helpful as a drowned fish! And that rose... there was definitely something odd about it. She'd even been speaking to it when he first arrived. Was it like the labyrinth? Did it have a sentience to it?

He was going to find out, but first he had to figure out supper.

He stomped his way back to his hidden cave, feeling the floor rumble underneath him when the wall closed him in. It was ridiculous that he had to even feed the girl at all. She was a criminal for Fairmyth's sake. She was meant to starve down here like the rest of the scum who were banished to his prison.

It would probably be easier to just kill her and steal the rose for himself, but that was easier said than done... The girl wasn't a problem, but the rose certainly was. The way it flashed at him before it seized all of his muscles and locked him in place was unlike any magic he'd ever come in contact with. And while he was certain he could fight past it if needed, he was far more interested in why it existed in the first place.

And that girl seems to know something.

"Stupid mortal," the beast grumbled to himself as he scrubbed his hands in the water spring at the back of his cave. "Thinks she can boss me around like some sort of servant."

He shook his hands off, watching the water flick off the end of his claws as he made his way to his garden. The dim glow in the labyrinth provided enough artificial light for root vegetables to grow underground, though they weren't nearly as lively as the roses that dotted the tunnels. It

was enough to sustain him, so he couldn't complain, though he wasn't sure his prissy new prisoner would be nearly as appreciative.

If I'm feeding her, then she better not complain...

The beast thrust his claws into the garden, tearing out some yellow potatoes in his large fist. He set them to the side, then pulled up some carrots, turnips, and grabbed a few herbs from the few leafy bushes that had managed to thrive in the strange environment. Usually, he didn't care to spice his food, but he had a guest tonight, and... well, he didn't want to give her a *reason* to complain.

He sniffed the bushes, trying to remember which one was rosemary and which one was mint. The mint flooded his senses like an icy breeze, and while he enjoyed the fragrance, he knew it wouldn't pair well with the starchy veggies. He plucked a few sprigs of rosemary off the other bush, then looked over at his lone tea bush that he had never made the effort to fool around with.

Blast it, she might want tea...

He grumbled under his breath, then decided to save that dilemma for after he had gotten the stew started. He chopped up the veggies using a small dagger he had confiscated from a prisoner, first dicing the potatoes and then the turnips.

"Do you think she was some sort of lady above the surface?" the beast asked the labyrinth, pausing before he started working on the carrots. "Do ladies like carrots?"

The floor rumbled in response, and the beast clenched the dagger as he tried to interpret what that meant.

"It's not a dumb question, if that's what you're thinking!" he huffed. "Maybe she has something against orange foods! It's a pretty strange color."

The walls vibrated this time.

"It is! What if she gets mad that I put carrots in her supper?" He looked down at the half-chopped carrots, trying to determine if he was going to poison his chances of learning anything if he put them in the stew. "Maybe I'll just add half. Then she can poke around them. Ladies poke, right?"

The labyrinth didn't respond, and the beast couldn't blame it when he repeated the question in his head. He tossed half the carrot in, then added the rosemary sprig, which admittedly, made it look far more appealing. He sparked a fire in the small pit he'd dug out in the corner, then placed the stew overtop the flames. There wasn't much ventilation in the cave, so the space always got smokey when he cooked, but there seemed to be some sort of filtration; otherwise, he would have choked himself out years ago. It was like the strange glow of the labyrinth; which seemed to have its own way of absorbing the smoke.

"Now... what about the tea?" The beast moved back to the bush, and crouched to inspect the leaves. He'd heard plenty about tea from the prisoners who muttered to themselves over the years. He knew it came from leaves, that it was served as a drink, and that it was usually hot. Though he'd never attempted to make it himself...

How tricky can it be?

He grabbed a couple of fistfuls of leaves and took it over to one of his cracked cups. He looked at the leaves, then back at the cup before he decided on the most logical way to proceed. He crushed the leaves in his hands, squeezing them with all his might in an attempt to extract the tea juice from them. No luck.

"How do you juice?" the beast grumbled. He tried squeezing them harder, his muscles bulging as a tiny drop of liquid was crushed out of the leaves. It didn't look like nearly enough. There had to be another way... "Wait, tea is hot, right?"

Maybe that's it!

He grabbed another pot and filled it with spring water, then shoved it over the fire next to the stew. He waited for the water to simmer, then boil, then grabbed all the leaves in one full grip. Without even wincing, he plunged the fist full of leaves into the scalding water, his thick skin protecting him from most of the heat. He gave it a few good dunks, ensuring the leaves were well heated before bringing them back to the cup. He stuffed the leaves in the cup, then observed his new handiwork with a scratch of his chin.

Is it supposed to be so green? And leafy?

He tilted his head. He'd heard prisoners mention *green tea*, hadn't he? Surely this was at least partially correct.

Or completely wrong.

“Ergh, whatever! She'll take whatever I give her!” the beast bellowed, kicking aside a stray rock with his hoof. “Bring her to me. At the very least, she better see the tea while it's still hot.”

chapter twenty-two

Malik stood silently as he watched the four men approach from the shadows. The cool night air was too brisk for Malik's liking, but the whistle of the wind would cover up most of the whispers that were soon to come. The labyrinth gates stood tall behind him, splitting the moonlight with jagged shadows from the gate's bars. He instantly recognized the scrunched letter in one of the men's hands. The cracked remnants of his seal still clung to the parchment, or at least, the seal he used for less *public* business.

"Good to see you can follow instructions," Malik greeted the men as they stopped only a few feet from him. Their features were masked in the moonlight, though he could still make out their eyes. They were definitely mortal, which would serve him well. Mortals were always more willing to work for their gold. "Is this everyone?"

"Why? Not enough muscle for ya?" The man with the letter snorted. "I thought you said we were just looking for a little girl."

"You are, but the place you're looking is no Olympian park," Malik explained as he met the eyes of the other men. "You all understand the danger this job poses, don't you?"

"Yeah, we get it," one of the taller men with a scarred lower lip said. "Raymond showed us your letter."

"But that doesn't mean we've all agreed yet." Raymond scrunched the letter in his palm. "You say that this girl has a key to the labyrinth, but here I thought the labyrinth was inescapable. At least, that's what *you* always preach."

Raymond crossed his arms, and the other men cornered Malik with quizzical glances. This was going to be the tough part when it came to convincing them. No one could truly know about the rose's power, so he needed to ensure he told them enough to get them to go after it, but not enough that they could ruin his perfect maze.

“The key is real,” Malik said, his tone low and dark. “It takes the form of a rose and often illuminates with magic. The girl was given the flower before entering the tunnels, and I can’t have her escaping. Doing so would —”

“We get it.” Raymond waved Malik off. “Then your cage will be discovered to have cracks. So you want us to do what, exactly? Steal the rose back?”

“I want you to destroy it,” Malik said.

“Destroy it?” A man with a scraggly goatee scrunched his thick brows. “Then how are we supposed to get out afterward?”

You’re not.

“Ah, you see, that’s the trick.” Malik flashed a promising smile. “The only way to activate the rose is by tearing it to shreds, because then a doorway will sprout from the fallen petals. I suspect the girl hasn’t figured it out yet because she would be too fearful to destroy her only hope of escape.”

The men shared a few thoughtful looks, each one slowly accepting the lie. Malik fought back the urge to chuckle. Mortals were always so gullible.

“And the girl?” Raymond asked. “Should we simply steal the rose and leave her to the beast?”

“I’d prefer if you killed her,” Malik said dryly. “We don’t want to risk her following you.”

“And what about this beast?” the taller man asked. “Is it real? What are we meant to do if we come in contact with him?”

Kill him, too, for all I care...

“Simply bring your weapons to defend yourself,” Malik explained. “All prisoners are sent into the labyrinth unarmed, so they are no match for the creature below. You all, however, are strong and resourceful. You are free to do whatever it takes to defend yourselves.”

The men flashed the blades they had tucked in their belts and waistbands, determining if it was enough to carve out a beast’s heart. Malik certainly hoped so.

“Kill the girl, destroy the rose, fend off the beast. Sounds simple enough.” Raymond shrugged. “Now tell me more about the pay... Is it as good as you wrote?”

Malik smiled, then reached into his coat to pull out a hefty sack of gold. He tugged open the drawstrings and flashed the coins to each of the men, watching their eyes sparkle with the gold. “One bag *each* upon your return. I believe it’s more than fair for the task at hand.”

The men circled, passing a few whispers between each other while sneaking glances back at the looming gates. A second later, Raymond stepped forward, the men standing ready behind him.

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a deal.” Raymond grinned, holding out his hand for a shake. Malik accepted it, but hated how grimy and rough Raymond’s skin felt. He’d have to wash up well after he got home. “We’ll find this rose. Just keep those bags ready for when we get back.”

“Of course,” Malik said as he turned to the tall gates. “Your reward will be waiting for you on the other side.” Malik unlocked the gate, then creaked it open just enough for the men to squeeze through. The squeak of the metal was deafening, so he didn’t dare pull it any further. “Are you ready?”

The men adjusted the blades in their grips, each one sharing a bloodthirsty grin as they glanced back at the gold for one final dose of motivation.

“We’re ready.” Raymond chuckled. “Time to go hunting, boys.”

With Raymond taking the lead, the men funneled through the gates, each one vanishing down the steps into the eternal darkness, never to be seen again.

“Good luck.” Malik chuckled. “Remember to destroy the rose!”

Then enjoy your trip to Underworth.

chapter twenty-three

Thea's stomach rumbled with the cavern walls as she wandered deeper into the maze. She kept the rose close to her heart, twirling the stem and getting lost in the vibrant petals and the sweet scent that wafted from them. It was definitely magical, but was it really a key?

"Do you open portals?" Thea asked the rose. "Or magically create staircases that sprout out of stone?"

The rose didn't respond, and she felt a little silly for hoping that it would. It was magical, but she couldn't tell if it was truly sentient or not. It seemed very similar to the magic that made up the labyrinth. It was intelligent, in a way, and could easily predict your next move or even respond to you.

"Perhaps you're not a key at all," Thea said to the flower. "Maybe Ceyden crafted you with some sort of party trick to make me pine for him when I was gone. I'm sure he loves the idea of me desperately trying to escape the labyrinth so I can run safely into his arms." She rolled her eyes.

The walls rumbled again a second later, but only down the tunnel to her left. She spun around to look at the commotion and, to her surprise, noticed that the tunnel was slightly brighter than before. A strong scent of roses flowed through the tunnel, drawing her closer with the sweet scent like a mystical call trying to pull her in.

Was this the labyrinth's way of guiding me to dinner?

"Well, I suppose you were valuable enough to earn me supper." Thea smirked at the rose. "So I guess I can at least thank Ceyden for that."

She held the flower close, then followed the tunnel as it guided her deeper into the maze. Anytime she came across a fork in the path, the tunnel would make it obvious where she needed to go, either by illuminating the walls and ceiling or luring her in with the sweet smell of flowers. She weaved through the tunnels, stepping over fallen stones and

old skeletons that always made her skin crawl. Many of them were missing their heads, which left little to the imagination when wondering how they died.

She brushed a finger across her smooth neck, wondering if she would receive the same treatment after the beast learned all he wanted about the rose. If that was his plan, there was no sense in fearing it. She knew what the consequences of entering the labyrinth would be, and even if she *could* escape, all she had waiting for her was a betrothal from Ceyden.

And her family...

She met a dead end, finding nothing but a plain wall of rock that was illuminating like she was meant to continue onward.

“Uh.” She looked up at the ceiling. “I don’t know what the beast is capable of, but I can’t crush through walls. Is there any other direction I can go?”

She waited for the maze to respond, but the wall continued to glow like it was the only answer. She turned around, checking behind her to see if there was another path that would direct her behind the wall. The second she spun around, a loud quaking echoed behind her. She jumped, and looked back at the glowing wall, only to find that it had completely vanished, leaving a brand-new opening in the maze.

“Oh.” She blinked. “That will work.”

Thea stepped through the opening and was instantly greeted with the rich smell of a hearty soup. Her stomach growled in anticipation, and she salivated as she took in the striking oasis that was hidden in what appeared to be the maze’s heart.

It was still a cave, but it had a makeshift table made of carved stone with boulders as chairs, and a tattered scrap of cloth serving as the tablecloth. There was a cozy fire in the corner, that filled the room with a smokey haze, and a bubbling spring that misted the air around it. In the other corner was what appeared to be a tattered bed, big enough for a beast to fit comfortably on, and loads of other trinkets and items that appeared to have been confiscated off of old prisoners.

“Enjoying the view?” The beast’s raw voice echoed behind her, sending a ripple up her spine that silenced her gnawing stomach. She turned to face him, discovering that he was only a few inches behind her.

His intense eyes met hers, glowering down at her in a way that would have been intimidating if she wasn't so fascinated by them.

"It's definitely more fascinating than stone walls and skeletons," Thea said, unable to break eye contact even if she wanted to.

"Well, that's a view you'll need to get used to." The beast frowned, flashing his pearly white fangs. "This room only opens up when I allow it, so don't think you'll be able to find it again." He pushed past Thea, making his way toward the bubbling pot that was seated over the fire.

"When *you* allow it?" Thea cocked her head. "Or when the *labyrinth* allows it. It seems to have a mind of its own."

"The labyrinth is mine to command," the beast huffed, glaring at Thea as he placed the sloshing pot on top of the stone table.

The ceiling rumbled in reply.

"Right..." Thea crossed her arms. "Sure, you seem *very* in control."

"Do you want supper, or not?" the beast growled, then cursed something under his breath as he glared up at the cavern walls.

Thea's stomach groaned. "Yes, but only if you promise to be nice."

"Nice?"

"Yes, this could very well be my final meal," Thea argued. "I don't want to spend it with a grouchy host."

"You'll get whatever host I decide to be."

"Then you'll get whatever information I *decide* to share." Thea wagged the rose tauntingly. She'd dealt with enough of Ceyden's impudence to have been fed up with brooding men. He could either dine with her cordially, or not at all.

"I'm happy to let you starve," the beast said darkly.

"It wouldn't be the first time I chose to preserve my dignity over life." Thea shrugged. "I came to the labyrinth by choice, remember? I'm likely going to starve either way, so I have no issue requesting the respect I deserve for my last meal."

"Criminals don't deserve respect."

"I'm not a criminal."

"You're here."

“So are you.”

“Yes, but I’m a beast!” he snarled.

“Even beasts deserve respect,” Thea said plainly, and to her surprise, the beast went quiet. His eyes widened, but the tension in his features didn’t lessen. “All I ask is one final meal I can look back fondly on. I’ll tell you everything I know about the rose if you can give me that.”

I get the sense that he wouldn’t mind a civil dinner either... has he ever even had a guest before?

The beast clenched his jaw, his brain whirling behind his lost gaze, until he finally let out a long breath and gestured toward the open seat. “Please...” he grumbled, “will you join me for dinner?”

chapter twenty-four

Thea took her seat on the cold stone, surprised by how comfortable it was as a chair. The beast portioned out a serving of stew in another bowl-shaped rock and slid it toward her, sloshing a bit of the thin broth onto the table covering.

The smell was tantalizing, just like the stews she had helped make at Lord Malik's estate. There was no silverware, so she had to pick up the bowl and sip it like a heavy cup, but she didn't mind. The chunks of carrot, potato, and other veggies warmed her from the inside out, filling her stomach and embracing her with the comforting broth. She wished there were more carrots but wasn't about to complain about a meal she was never meant to have.

"Well?" the beast muttered under his breath. Thea looked up from her bowl, surprised to find that he had been watching her the entire time she'd been eating, his own bowl still untouched. "How is it?"

Thea wiped her chin, ensuring none of the broth was dribbling down. "It's delicious. Why? Did you poison it or something?"

"No." He rolled his eyes. "I just... never mind." He dove into his bowl with his claws, piercing bits of potato and radish and popping them into his mouth.

Was he trying to be nice?

"Thank you," Thea said with a small smile. "I appreciate you going to the trouble to cook for me."

The beast froze with a piece of carrot midway to his open mouth. He lowered the skewered carrot and cleared his throat. "You're welcome." He averted his eyes from Thea, as if he was too shy to accept her gratitude, or he wasn't sure if he was doing it right. "I'm glad you find it adequate. Now, why don't you hold up your end of the deal, as well?"

That's right...

Thea looked down at the rose in her lap, then moved it onto the table for the beast to view. His eyes were instantly drawn to it, full of curiosity and a strange hope that made his face light up a touch.

“What would you like to know?” Thea asked as she reached for her cup. She glanced inside, and though it smelled like a strong tea, she was surprised to find that it was stuffed almost to the rim with leaves and only a slight bit of water on the bottom. She set the cup back down.

“Everything,” the beast said bluntly. “Where it came from, what it does, why you brought it into the labyrinth of all places?”

“I already told you. It was given to me,” Thea replied.

“By whom?” The beast narrowed his eyes. “And why would they give you such a thing?”

“Well...” Thea scratched her head. “The *why* is a bit of a long story. As for *who*, that’s easy. It was given to me by Ceyden Ashoran, the son of Lord Malik, the creator of the labyrinth.”

His eyes widened, and for a moment, the entire labyrinth seemed to go still. The room felt cold, and even the smoke from the fire seemed to thicken as if the walls were unable to absorb it any longer.

“Lord Malik?” The beast repeated. “He has a son?”

“So you know of Lord Malik then?” Thea pried, her interest piqued as she watched the beast’s claws curl into a tight fist. “Oh, of course you would know him... He did create your home, after all.”

“Yes,” the beast said coldly, his eyes fixated on his curled claws. “I know him. Now, what about this son of his?”

“Ceyden,” Thea repeated. “He’s Lord Malik’s only child, and a bit of a spoiled one at that. He stole the rose from his father’s study, believing it was some sort of key that could help me escape.”

Thea watched closely as the beast’s face twisted, first into pain, then anger, then what almost looked like amusement. She was so drawn into watching him that she didn’t even realize when she had picked up the cup of leafy tea and sucked back a leaf whole.

“That’s the first true lie you’ve told,” the beast said with a dry chuckle. “Though I don’t think you even knew it.”

“What?”

“Lord Malik doesn’t have just one son...” The beast lifted his chin, showcasing his beastly chest as he stretched out his arms to display all the parts that made him inhuman. “He has two.”

Two? Wait...

“You?” Thea gaped. “You’re Lord Malik’s son?”

“His firstborn, by the looks of it,” the beast snorted. “Never knew I had a brother. Figures he’d want to replace me after I was tossed aside.”

Tossed aside?

“But wait, how do you know he’s your father, but not know about your brother?”

“I thought I was the one asking the questions?” the beast snapped with a stern glare.

“Yes, but you also agreed to be nice.”

“I can be nice and quiet at the same time.”

Drat, he’s right.

“All right, fine,” Thea said with a defeated sigh, feeling entirely unsatisfied with the limited history the beast had shared about his family. It was no wonder he sounded so much like Ceyden, and also no wonder why Ceyden was always so *monstrous*. “But if you *want* to talk about it... I could share more with you about your brother, though he’s admittedly not the most interesting person in the world...”

“Why should I need to know more about him? I didn’t even know he existed until you told me,” The beast said.

“Well, he’s still your family.”

“The same family that hid me in a labyrinth,” the beast said bitterly, tugging at Thea’s heart. “The only real family I ever had was my mother, though I barely remember her. She’s the one who left me with the ring that allowed me to survive, and the note that explained... well, explained that.” He pointed to the rose, his eyes clouded like he didn’t fully believe what he was looking at.

“The rose? Your mother knew about it?” Thea studied the petals, recalling the tragic story of how Lady Evelyn perished after the birth of Ceyden. She wondered if the beast knew that, too...

“Maybe,” the beast settled back into his seat. “She left me a note stating that a rose would be the key to my curse, though I have no clue if it’s the same flower as the one you have.”

A rose guarded by the labyrinth’s creator...

“So it’s not a key then,” Thea said. “It’s a cure?”

“You make it sound like I’m sick.”

“Maybe you are. You’ve barely told me anything about you.”

“Well, I’m not sick. I’m cursed. I figured even *you* could see that.”

“See what?” Thea crossed her arms. “I see a man who is after something he’s exhausted all his other efforts on.”

“No, you see a beast who *used* to be a man.”

“I’ve met a beast before,” Thea said firmly, her thoughts flashing back to Ceyden’s crimes. “You’re not him.”

He didn’t respond after that, and she wasn’t sure if that was because he wanted her to carry on the conversation or because he was plotting how to kill her.

“Is that why you were so protective of the roses?” Thea pieced together. “Because you assumed one of them would be the one that would break your curse?”

That would certainly explain why he was so angry at her for nearly picking one.

“Like I said, I don’t know if your rose is the one I’m looking for,” the beast said quietly. “I couldn’t risk losing any of them.”

“I see...” Thea bit her lip as she thought back to all the headless skeletons she saw in the tunnels. “Is that why you killed all those men? Because they touched your roses?”

“I killed them to be merciful,” the beast replied hastily, as if he needed to validate his killing to himself as much as he did her. “The men who enter this labyrinth have only one way out, which is to Underworth’s graves. I do them the kindness of speeding up their journey so they don’t have to suffer for weeks without food.”

The stew soured in Thea’s stomach, and she wondered if she was the first prisoner to ever eat something other than a poisonous mushroom in

the labyrinth. If she was meant to starve after this supper, she wondered if the beast would offer her the same mercy.

“So, what do you plan to do now that I’ve brought the rose?” Thea asked, unsure if she was ready for the answer. *It wasn’t a key... it was a cure for the beast, so what did that mean for her?*

The beast met her eyes, seeming to understand what she was asking as he looked between her and the enchanted flower.

“Do you plan to grant me mercy as well?” Thea asked.

chapter twenty-five

The beast stared at the rose for longer than he realized. Could it really be the one he was looking for? If what the girl said was true, then it came from his father...

That certainly seemed to fit the narrative.

He needed to find out more. The rose clearly contained magic, but what kind? Was it enough to break his curse? Open the labyrinth? There was no way to be sure until he held it in his claws.

“Do you wish for my mercy?” the beast asked the girl, watching as her shoulders rose with a sharp breath. “I will not deny you a swift end if you request one.”

“What I truly wish for doesn’t appear to be an option.” She swallowed. “I don’t wish to starve, but I don’t wish to die by your hand, either. I was given this rose because your brother had hope it could pull me out of these tunnels, though it would seem he was wrong about the intent of its magic. However, that doesn’t mean there’s not another way one can escape.”

“No one escapes the labyrinth.”

“Well, not yet.”

“Not ever.”

“That seems rather pessimistic,” Thea said stiffly.

“I’m afraid you won’t find a great deal of optimism from me. Now, do you want to die early or not?” he asked grimly.

“Who says I have to die at all?” Thea met him with those stubborn eyes of hers. Why did they always stare straight at him like that? Most men couldn’t bear to look at his face for more than a minute before cowering back in disgust, but this girl... she stared death dead in the eyes. “I’m the one with the rose, after all. Perhaps I can help you figure out the magic it carries.”

“Or I could just kill you and take it for myself,” the beast glowered.

Thea tilted a brow. “Is that what you plan to do?”

“If I must.”

“I don’t think there’s a *must*,” Thea said with an assured smile teasing her pink lips.

Why was she so confident? She did know that she was in a prison with no doors, right?

“Is that a challenge?” the beast glanced over at his axe, his blood going cold the second he looked at it. Truth be told, he didn’t want to see her bleed. He’d spoken to her far too much for this to be a kill absent of emotion, but he couldn’t let her believe there was any other way out, either. Perhaps it would be easier on them both if she asked him to end her. “I *will* kill you, if prompted.”

“I don’t think you will.”

Fairmyth, I bet it was that mouth of hers that got her sent here in the first place.

“Why not?” the beast growled, his patience thinning faster than a fraying rope. “I’ve slain hundreds of men in these tunnels. What makes you any different?”

“Well, for starters, I’m not a criminal.”

Again, with this?

“If you’re truly not a criminal, then you must be a fool.” The beast flashed his fangs, but even with his fiercest scowl, she didn’t quake. “No one simply walks into the labyrinth. I’ve killed my share of fools, as well.”

“Then you can kill one more.” She rose from her seat, snatching up the rose from the table as she held it close to her heart like a shield. “If I’m foolish for hoping to see my family again, then so be it. Kill me if you must, but I refuse to hand over the rose while there’s still a chance I can escape.”

The beast’s blood boiled, his snout steaming as he stood up from the table with a slam of his fists. She thought she could simply push him around because she had a fancy flower. This was *his* labyrinth, *his* home, and *his* curse to deal with. She had no part in it.

I'll get the rose myself, then...

"Very well," The beast stormed over to his axe and snatched it into his claws. "If you wish for me to take it by force, then that's what will be done. I already warned you I wouldn't deny you my *mercy*."

The girl's eyes went wide, finally showcasing a sliver of fear as she caught her reflection in the blood-stained axe. She staggered back from her spot, keeping the rose close to her chest as she looked around for the way out. Seeing her cower twisted something in the beast's core, but his anger coated over it, blinding him with a fresh bloodlust. He'd done enough talking; that rose was going to be his, one way or the other.

"Don't run!" the beast bellowed as he took the first swing, hitting only air as the girl darted back toward the way she came in. "You wouldn't want me to miss your neck."

"I don't want you to hit it, either!" she shouted back as she ran for the stone wall that blocked her inside. Her red skirts fluttered behind her, like an omen of death, readying the beast for the sight of her blood. "Please! I can help you! The rose is—"

"Is mine!" The beast threw his axe, flying it through the air right in line with the girl's throat. She ducked, and the blade smashed into the wall behind her, hard enough that it embedded in the stone that marked the hidden door.

She froze, trapped between the axe and the incoming beast. He snatched her by the shoulder, forcing a gasp from her as he pushed her up against the wall. He curled his claws around her shoulder, just enough to warn her with the sharp tips but not enough to puncture her skin. He wasn't one to torture his prey, but today it was tempting.

The rage he felt was like no other. She'd mocked him, ordered him around, and had the audacity to stare him dead in the eyes.

Just like she was now..

His breath snagged in the back of his throat, caught off guard by the wide eyes that gripped him in a chokehold. She looked terrified. He'd seen the look a thousand times when he ripped the soul from a criminal's body, but it had never shaken him like this before. She held his eyes for a few solid seconds, her gaze tunneling into his soul like she couldn't believe the

monstrous form he had taken on so quickly. Why did she look at him like that? Like he *wasn't* a monster, and this was surprising?

"I've met a beast before. You're not him."

She's lying... I am a beast. I'm the maze's monster, and she's... she's...

He took the rose, prying it straight from her delicate fingers. She jumped but didn't resist, shutting her eyes as she readied herself for what came next. The beast yanked his axe out of the wall, then released her shoulder, glancing his eyes over her to ensure he hadn't left any marks on her skin.

"Go," he said under his breath.

The wall behind her rumbled, and a second later, it disappeared, opening back up into the labyrinth. The girl whirled around, still breathing heavily as she looked at the new escape route.

"But, why—"

"Go!" the beast roared, and she didn't resist.

She dashed into the tunnels, vanishing into the darkness, and leaving the beast with a rose in his claws and a pit in his stomach. Perhaps he wasn't so merciful after all.

chapter twenty-six

The beast didn't move at first. He kept looking at the dark tunnels he had sent the girl running down. She was perhaps the first person to look at him like a human, yet he had acted like a beast. He looked down at the rose in his grasp, noticing how heavy it suddenly felt.

It had to be done.

The girl's fate was sealed the moment she stepped into the labyrinth. Whether she was truly a criminal or not, he couldn't save her from that fate, though he hadn't been able to grant her the swift end he had promised, either. His stomach turned as he thought about her starving until she could barely lift that pretty little head. He had been too weak to kill her, and now she had to suffer the consequences.

He stepped back into his cave, letting the silence surround him until it was interrupted by a rumble in the labyrinth's floor that nearly tripped his hooves.

"Don't be cross with me," he spat at the labyrinth floor. "I did what I had to do. She didn't want to be killed yet, so I let her go. As for the rose, she had no right to keep it. For all I know, she stole it from my family and invented the whole story."

The labyrinth rumbled again, this time hard enough that he needed to brace himself on the stone table.

"What's done is done!" the beast said with gritted teeth. "If it makes you happy, I can go find her and end her life while she's asleep."

His stomach twisted at the thought. Even without those enchanting eyes in front of him, he could still feel them digging into him. Could he really drain them of life when they were already bursting full of it?

It doesn't matter. She's gone now and probably won't want to ever see me again, anyway.

He rubbed at his temple, careful not to scratch himself, as he took a seat on one of the boulder chairs. He turned his attention to the rose, hopeful that he could distract himself by diving into the mystery behind its magic. He spun the rose around to look at the center of it, but when he did, he noticed that it looked different than before.

“What?” He narrowed his eyes on the flower, feeling his heart rate increase as he searched for the bright glow that was no longer present. “What’s wrong? Why does it look so dull?”

The vibrant shade of red had begun to darken like drying blood, and the warm glow that illuminated the shadows was all but faded. It was just like the rosebushes in the labyrinth... but this one was wilting before his eyes. The petals were curling, the stem softening, and the color kept getting darker by the second.

“Stop! You can’t die!” He tried to lift the petals with the tip of his claw, but the second he touched it, the petal turned brittle and fell right off.

It wilted from my touch.

He dropped the flower, letting it fall to the table with a soft *thud* that felt so much louder in the beast’s mind. Not even a second after the flower left his grip, life returned to the bloom. The stem stiffened and turned back to a dark green; the petals flourished like they’d just received a much-needed drink of water, and the magical glow slowly returned. The only evidence that anything had happened to the rose at all was the crumpled petal that had fallen by the beast’s hooves.

“I can’t touch it...” the beast breathed.

The curse can be broken by this rose, but not by you, by someone sent to you.

The words from his mother’s letter ran in his head, and he found himself spinning the golden ring on his finger. He’d nearly forgotten that pesky detail. Did that mean he needed the girl after all?

Maybe not her, but at least someone unaffected by my curse. Blast it.

He plucked the ring off his finger and shifted the band so he could read the engraved names on the interior of the gold band.

Malik and Evelyn.

Malik... the creator of his prison, and now the crafter of the key. The father he didn't remember but could never forget. Did he even know the rose had made it down here? Did this *Ceyden* know about the rose's true purpose so he could send it to his lost brother? Doubtful... A thousand questions pattered against his skull like a shower of gravel. The only true answer he had was that this rose couldn't be wielded by him, which meant that it was definitely the one he had been searching for.

And the girl was telling the truth... She'd been given the flower by the younger son of Lord Malik.

What else had she been honest about? The beast gnawed his lip, wondering just how *beastly* she had been. She claimed she wasn't a criminal, so what other reason could she have for entering the labyrinth? It couldn't have been for him. No one cared about him, yet...

He thought back to her big eyes, and the way they didn't want to believe that there was a monster inside him.

"I need to find her again, don't I?" the beast grumbled to himself, earning a low rumble from the labyrinth's ceiling. "That is, if she'll even let me get close to her after what I did. Perhaps I should wait a few days until she's hungry? Then it will be hard for her to refuse me."

The labyrinth walls rumbled, but he wasn't sure if it was its way of scolding him or agreeing.

"Well, she's not going to simply—" His ring warmed, and the labyrinth stilled at the same moment. "Wait..."

He shifted his focus, trying to utilize the ring's magic to detect what had just disturbed the maze's walls. The gates were closed, but had they always been? He'd been so distracted with the girl and the rose that he hadn't even thought to pay attention to the labyrinth's alerts.

"Someone has entered the maze..." the beast breathed, his chest tightening as the ring's magic alerted him to each new footstep that hindered his peace. "Not just one... there's a whole group. Four men."

The girl! Where is the girl?

His ring instantly shifted targets, easily sensing his what he wanted most, which was to know the location of his latest victim. He could sense her movements, along with the brush of her skirt against the stone and the

soft puffs of her breath. She was on the move, and she was getting closer to the new group of prisoners.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” he shouted into the maze’s ceiling as he snatched up his axe and ran for the exit. He raised the ring to his lips, his voice sharp and dry as he demanded it take him to what he wanted most. “Take me to the girl!”

chapter twenty-seven

What was I thinking, trying to reason with a beast?

Thea wrapped her arms around her torso, her palms feeling strangely empty without the warm rose in her grasp. She should have expected something like this to happen, yet she couldn't have anticipated what the beast actually *did*.

He let me escape.

He had every reason to kill her. She was in his domain, had already given him everything he wanted, and was making unreasonable requests. So why did he let her go? Perhaps that was his true way of letting her suffer. Without the rose or any access to food, she was left with no other escape but to succumb to starvation. It would make sense to assume that was the fate he intended for her, yet she didn't fully believe it. He didn't act like he wanted her to suffer.

She recalled how gently he had pressed her against the wall. His sharp claws could have easily shredded her flesh, yet he was careful not to scratch her. He pinned her as gently as one would catch a butterfly by the wings, only applying enough force to hold her in place so he could take what he wanted. It would have been so easy for him to crush her in his strong grasp, pierce her skin, or claim her head. It was probably harder to be soft...

So why? Why did he do it?

Trying to understand it was torment, which made her wonder if the beast was more sadistic than he realized. He would likely never seek her out again, which meant she would die with these questions picking at her mind. Frustration burned through her veins, quickening her steps despite not having a true destination. It would probably be wise to hunt for another water spring like the first one she had come across, but without the rose, she had no sense of direction. The maze seemed colder somehow, like she was left without the torch that guided her. She wondered how long she

could walk. Should she give up and sit down? Continue walking to hope she'd find something new?

Walking was more appealing than feeling restrained. The maze at least was never boring. Thea thought about how Lord Malik's magic worked, and how his puzzle magic was always fastened to an object. Could that object be the rose?

It would certainly make sense. The rose was a living plant, which would explain why the maze was capable of growing, changing, and adapting. It would also explain why rosebushes sprouted in its walls, despite not being able to survive in these elements under normal circumstances.

From what she understood, Lord Malik's puzzle magic had to be centered on one object, but could encompass a great deal depending on the strength of the object he selected. Had he ever used a living vessel for his puzzles before? It makes sense why the labyrinth would be so powerful, but how was one supposed to unravel it?

Killing the rose felt like the obvious option, but what would that do to the beast if his curse was tied to the same flower? Other than having a strange appearance, he didn't seem to have done anything to deserve to be trapped in the labyrinth. Was he locked down here simply because of how he looked? If that was the case, Lord Malik was even crueler than she imagined... Who would toss away their son just because of how they looked? The questions persisted, echoing in her mind until she could almost hear them around her.

Wait... those aren't my thoughts I'm hearing...

She paused, listening closer until she was certain she heard something down one of the tunnels. Was it a voice? Footsteps? She couldn't fully make it out with the way the walls echoed.

Maybe it's the beast.

She started moving toward the sound. She knew it wasn't the smartest idea to run back to the beast—who nearly killed her twice—but too many things were left unfinished for her to leave it alone. The path opened up, showcasing two possible tunnels she could go down.

It felt strange not having the rose to guide her, but she could follow the sound well enough on its own. The path with the sound looked

distinctly darker, like the labyrinth was trying to guide her away from it. She paused for a moment, but decided the light was too insignificant for it to mean anything without the magic of the rose. Not to mention, the sound was coming from the other path, and she didn't want to miss an opportunity to speak to the beast. It wasn't as if she had much else to look forward to in her prison.

"Hello?" she called down the tunnel, moving slowly through it as she kept an eye out for the beast's looming shadow. "Beast? Is that you?"

The sounds stopped. It was definitely him then. Clearly, someone had to have heard her to freeze like that. Was he not planning to run into her? Or maybe he was hoping to sneak up on her with his axe and realized he lost the element of surprise?

"If you've come to finish me off, you don't need to hide," Thea said with a huff. "Come out and face me. I have some questions before you fulfill your duty as executioner."

The sound of footsteps followed, but it sounded different than the ones she'd heard from the beast before. The beast had hooves that clacked on the ground... so why did this sound like boots? And why did it sound like more than one?

A bad feeling crept into Thea's gut, but before she could act on it, a figure stepped out of the shadows. "I'm not the executioner, darling..." A coarse voice, paired with a scarred face, and a twisted grin that gripped her in the darkness.

Thea staggered back a step, and her heart hammered as three more men stepped forward behind him. *New prisoners? No, they're not wearing red.*

Each man was dressed in common attire, each with a weapon proudly clasped in their hands. Prisoners weren't permitted to bring items into the labyrinth... she was lucky Ceyden smuggled in the rose for her. These men weren't sent here the same way she was.

Then why are they here?

"W-who are you?" Thea asked in a wobbly voice, her eyes glued to the wicked point of the first man's sword.

“Not the beast,” the man snorted, a crooked smile crossing his lips as he looked Thea up and down, “but we’re happy to stand in for his duties.”

chapter twenty-eight

“A-are you criminals?” Thea asked, her mind hunting for her quickest escape route as she tried to shift back from their approaching weapons.

“How did you get weapons into the labyrinth?”

“*Criminal* is a broad term.” One of the men with a scraggly beard chuckled. “We’ve all caused a ruckus here or there, but today, we’re more of a delivery service, and you have the package we’re in need of.”

Package?

“I don’t have anything,” Thea said. Her eyes darted down the closest tunnel; it was illuminated so strongly, that it was nearly beaming. Was the labyrinth trying to guide her away? “I was stripped of all belongings before entering the labyrinth, like every prisoner.”

Or like every prisoner is *supposed* to be. This didn’t make any sense. How did a group of armed men get into the labyrinth, unless they wandered in by themselves? Didn’t they know it was inescapable?

“Don’t play dumb with us, missy,” the men at the front scoffed. “Your pretty face may have convinced the lord’s son to give you a rose, but it won’t convince us to let you keep it.”

The rose?

“You’ve come for Lord Malik’s flower...” Thea pieced together. Her hand instinctually flexed around the invisible stem, briefly forgetting that the beast had swiped it from her earlier. Did that mean these men were sent by Lord Malik? *Did Ceyden tell him that he gave it to me?*

“That’s right.” The man at the front of the group pulled out a dagger alongside his sword, his crooked teeth flashing in the blade’s reflection. “Why don’t you make this easy and hand it over so things don’t have to get messy?”

Thea’s stomach twisted. She didn’t have it, but they didn’t seem too keen on hearing her out. She ran, but only made it a few steps before one

of the men grabbed at her arm.

“Hey!” He tugged on her sleeve, tearing at the fabric as Thea pulled free.

She darted down the illuminated tunnel, taking every turn she could to try to split herself away from her new hunters. She silently begged the labyrinth to guide her, not sure if it could even grant her request. The men’s feet echoed in hot pursuit behind her, the stomp of their boots hammering into Thea’s skull with each puff of her breath.

There wasn’t much time to make decisions on pathways to take. If one was obviously brighter, she would choose that one, but in some cases, it was hard to tell at just a glance. She felt like she was running in circles while her breath was running out. A stitch burned in her side, but she persisted forward.

The men were still too close.

She rounded another corner, only realizing a second too late that the one beside it was the brighter one. She hoped it wouldn’t matter, but only a few feet later, she nearly collided with a stone wall.

Dead end.

She tried to turn around, hoping there was still time to choose a different path, but the men were already blocking off her escape.

“Grab her!” one of the men shouted.

Thea’s heart raced. She tried to push past the two incoming men before they could take hold of her, but she was outnumbered and outmatched. The two bigger men seized her by the arms while the others blocked the path. She kicked and screamed, unsure who she was calling out to in the empty tunnels, but also unwilling to go down quietly.

“Let me go!” Thea squirmed.

“Not until you give us the rose!” The leader of the group pressed his dagger against her throat, silencing her screaming with a single cool touch of the blade. “Where is it!?”

“I don’t have it,” Thea said, trying to force calm into her voice that she didn’t feel. “I have nothing to give you.”

“Don’t lie!” The man slashed the blade, striking Thea on the cheek. She squealed, her skin stinging as warm blood oozed from the fresh cut

that was only inches away from her eye. “We know the Ashoran brat gave it to you! Where did you hide it?”

The men pressed her wrists against the wall to keep her from thrashing. The cool stone scraped against her skin, leaving her stiff with the fear coursing in her veins.

“I didn’t hide it, it’s—” Thea gasped as the man slapped her face, spiking another round of pain in her fresh cut and easily bruising her lip.

Would he even let her speak?

“Listen here, little miss,” the man’s voice darkened, his eyes shadowed in the cave’s low light as he leaned in close, “I don’t like repeating myself. We all know that flower is the ticket out of here, and I, for one, don’t want to stick around in this dirt hole until the beast comes wandering. Tell me where it is with your next breath...” He pressed his palm against the back of her hand, forcing her fingers to spread out against the coarse stone. He hovered his dagger above Thea’s pointer finger, mimicking a sawing action with the blade. “Or I’ll start cutting off a finger for every lie you tell.”

Thea’s blood went cold. She looked into the man’s eyes, searching for the bluff she couldn’t find. He meant it, he was willing to torture her until he found where the rose was hiding.

Because they think it’s their only way out...

Thoughts squirmed through her mind like a thousand crawly maggots. They knew about the rose. Not only that, but whoever had sent them knew enough about the rose to keep it out of Thea’s hands. Was Lord Malik really that desperate to keep Thea from escaping? Or someone else from escaping...

“Tick-tock,” he said with a smile full of gritted teeth. He pressed the edge of the blade just close enough to Thea’s skin that she could feel the chill of the metal.

“I-it’s with the beast!” she cried, wincing back as much as she could from the dagger’s edge. “He took it from me when I arrived! I meant it when I told you I don’t have it.”

The man looked back at the shorter crook behind him, then at the other two who were pinning Thea. “Don’t pretend I didn’t warn you about

lying,” he tsked as he pulled the blade back, preparing enough force to chop through bone.

“Wait! I’m not lying!” Thea cried.

“Yeah, right!” scoffed the man holding Thea’s right hand steady. “If the beast took the rose, why would you still be kicking? Do you really expect us to believe that you came face to face with that monster and survived?”

The blade slashed toward Thea’s hand, and she shut her eyes so she couldn’t watch it happen. She prepared for the shock to overwhelm her body, but it never came. At least, not the shock of losing a finger. A familiar voice prickled every hair on her body.

“She did,” the beast said in a voice so low, the growl was almost untranslatable. He was holding the leader’s wrist, his claws digging into his skin without any resistance. “But you won’t be so lucky.”

chapter twenty-nine

They're dead.

The beast tossed the first man to the side, smacking him to the nearest wall and sending the dagger flying from his fingers. He turned his attention to the men holding the girl next. They were both staring straight at him, locked in panic, as they focused on his horns, fangs, and snout. The girl was restrained in between them, blood dripping from her cheek as she met the beast's eyes with a wide stare.

He should have been faster. Look what they had already done to her.

"Let her go!" he roared, slashing his axe toward the men. The two men scattered, leaving behind the girl who remained stiff as the axe smashed harmlessly into the wall beside her. She sucked in a breath, but didn't flinch when the beast pulled the axe free from the wall.

The beast wasn't sure if she was still in shock from being ambushed, or if she was stunned by having him come to her rescue. Either way, he couldn't let her distract him now. He needed to get her out of here so she could help him figure out the rose.

"Kill the beast!" a bearded man called as he lifted his sword to face him. "He must have our rose!"

Their rose?

The man swung for the beast's chest, but it was completely in vain. The beast caught the blade between his claws, his powerful grip easily holding the blade away from his thick flesh. The attacker's face paled. He tried to tug his sword free, but the beast's grip was stronger than the steel.

"Who let you bring weapons in here?" the beast growled, tightening his grip on the sword until his claws left dents in the metal. "And why are you ganging up on another prisoner?"

The *swish* of a blade echoed behind the beast, and he whirled around, tossing aside the bearded man's sword. Another attacker slashed at him,

and the beast barely managed to jump to the side before he carved a hole through his torso.

“You don’t have to worry about us, *beast*,” the man, whom the beast presumed was the leader, said with a crooked grin. “We’re just passing through. Just give us the rose and let us deal with the girl, and we’ll be on our way.”

The beast’s muscles tightened, and he subconsciously shifted in front of the girl like a shield of muscle. First, they want his rose, and now they want the only person who offered to help him decipher it. These men were beyond dead.

“Leave.” The beast smacked his axe into his palm, trying to calculate how many of the four men he could slaughter in one blow. “Or I’ll escort you out in pieces.”

“Now, now, beasty,” the leader laughed as he shifted his sword in his grip, the men following close behind his lead. “We can’t disappoint Lord Malik. Plus, how are we meant to leave without that rose?”

Lord Malik? His father sent them?

His thought distracted him for a moment too long. One of the men lunged for him, and he didn’t react until it was almost too late. The beast swung his axe at the man’s sword, planning to shatter the blade with the force of the blow. He swung the axe down, but the second it made contact, he felt a piercing pain split through his side.

“Agh!” the beast roared as the leader successfully landed a hit. His sword slashed against his side, cutting into his leathery skin and staining the blade red.

The sword the beast had swung at cracked in two, freeing him from at least one of the attackers so he could spin around and meet the leader before he could deliver another blow. He tried to aim for his head, but the shock slowed his movements, and the leader jumped back before he could make contact. The man with the broken sword staggered back, looking far more timid now that he was weaponless.

“Watch out!”

It took a second for the beast to realize that the warning had come from the girl. He turned around to the sound, his eyes growing wide as the

fourth man came running at him with another blade. He prepared to block it, but the pain in his side was overwhelming. He braced himself for another strike, but it never came.

Crash.

The woman smashed a blade against the attacker, blocking him from the beast only seconds before the sword shredded him. She must have picked up the sword that fell earlier, the one the beast caught with his claws. She wasn't very practiced with the blade, by the looks of it, but she didn't need to be. Her defense was enough to startle the man with the opposing blade and cause him to jump back with the others.

"Stay back!" she warned, fire flaming in her voice as she raised the blade between the men and the beast.

Is she... defending me?

"Teaming up with the beast?" The leader narrowed his eyes, waving to his group to fall back. They were down to only two swords and a dagger now, which was still more than most prisoners, but not a lot when fighting a monster. "Or do you just want to die by his claws instead?"

The beast roared behind her, directing his scowl at the men to prove that he fought alongside her in this instance.

"I see... What a pair you make," the leader scoffed, finally looking nervously at the beast's towering height. "This is far from over. We *will* get that rose. Just you wait."

He stumbled back into the darkness, and one by one, the men followed behind him until it was only the beast and the girl left in the tunnel. The beast finally took a breath, then immediately regretted it when pain shot through his side. He hissed, sinking to his knees as he dropped the axe and cupped his palm over the bleeding wound.

"You're hurt!" The girl gasped, dropping the sword as she rushed to inspect the injury. "Here, let me see!"

"Don't touch me!" The beast growled, shying away from her touch as the pain tugged at his nerves. "I only got hurt because you nearly got yourself killed."

The girl recoiled, her face twisted with befuddlement as she tried to study him. "But, I'm supposed to die... that's the fate of all prisoners. Why

did you come and save me when you said yourself—”

“I just didn’t want you to die like a fool!” the beast argued, his blood heating with an odd rush flooding his skin. “I just...”

“Well, sorry to tell you, but I *am* a fool,” the girl cut him off, kneeling back down by his wound as she tried to get a closer look. “Not even you can save me from that. Now move your hand and let me be a fool again so I can help my executioner.”

“But—”

“Hush,” she scolded. “You just saved my life. Let me return the favor.”

chapter thirty

Thea helped the beast limp back to his cave, doing her best to take on even a fraction of his crushing weight on her shoulders. The labyrinth made it a lot easier, guiding them down short paths with downward slopes that helped her keep the beast moving. His wound was bleeding badly, but it didn't appear to be very deep. The sword only grazed him, leaving a deep cut and a very grouchy patient.

"Ouch!" the beast hissed as he stumbled over a stone and shifted his injured side. "Watch where you're leading me!"

"How about you watch where you're stepping?" Thea snapped as she shifted the placement of his arm over her shoulders. Even through the dark fur, she could feel the curve of his biceps, and with every wince he made, they constricted. "How much further to your cave?"

"How ever far the labyrinth wants it to be," he huffed.

"I thought you said *you* controlled the labyrinth?"

"Do I look like I can *control* anything right now?"

"You could always try to control your temper," Thea said sharply. "I don't *have* to help you. I could always let you hobble back on your own, if you prefer."

He muttered something under his breath, but remained silent otherwise. He had so much pride, it made sense that he was related to Ceyden—but, at least the beast knew when to take a step back and shut his mouth.

"There." The beast weakly pointed at a piece of the wall. "That's where the opening is."

Thea looked over at the beast, then back again at the solid wall, only to find that it was already gone, replaced with the opening she had last seen when she ran through it out of fear for her life. She guided the beast

inside, instantly smelling the fresh herbs from his garden and the lingering odor of over-steeped tea.

Thea led him over to the scrappy-looking bed and helped him lay on his good side, with the wound facing upward. He groaned with each breath, finally settling down with a pained sigh. Thea reached for his injury, attempting to peek under the torn scraps of his tunic to see if it was still bleeding. The beast coiled back at her touch, rolling away with another groan as he tried to keep her from messing with his wound.

“Hold still. I need to look at it,” Thea scolded.

“It’s fine!” the beast said through clenched teeth. “I don’t need you messing with it.”

“Would you quit being so stubborn and let me help you?”

The beast growled again, but Thea only glared at him, holding his gaze like a contest of dominance until he finally conceded and rolled back over. He didn’t say anything, but Thea honestly preferred it that way over his grumbling. She pulled back the tunic that was already soaked red. She needed to clean the wound and bind it.

She left the beast’s side and hunted around the cave for some for some sort of cloth. She found an old cloak and tore it into strips. Thea boiled water over the fire to dip them in before returning to the beast’s side. His breathing had gotten heavier, probably dizzy from all the blood loss.

“Hold still,” Thea said as she dabbed the sterilized cloth on the wound. The beast growled, but he obeyed. His entire body tightened, causing more blood to gush from the wound, but he held still enough that she was able to clean most of it away. She took one of the bigger cloths and bound it as tightly as she could to slow the bleeding.

“There,” Thea said as she secured the final knot. “Try not to move around too much. The bleeding has slowed, but it will get worse if you agitate it.”

“I can move if I want to,” he argued.

“No. You can’t.”

“You don’t speak for me.”

“Perhaps I should. All you do is complain on your own!” Thea folded her arms. “If you didn’t want to get hurt, then why did you jump into the

middle of a fight in the first place?”

“To save your sorry skin, of course!” The beast leaned forward, grimacing from the pain before settling back on the bed. “You could at least try to sound grateful.”

So he did save me intentionally...

“Thank you,” Thea said, startling the beast as he flicked his eyes to hers. “For saving me from those men. Do you plan to tell me why you did it?”

The beast paused, his lips pressed together under his flared snout as he battled with his next words. “I... I think I need you.”

Thea’s heart pulsed and her cheeks flared with heat. The beast noticed the change in color, his eyes growing wide as he realized what he’d said.

“N-not like that!” he said hastily. “I mean, I need your help! Not you specifically— Well, yes, *you* specifically, but not like... argh!” He smacked a palm to his forehead and Thea bit back a laugh. He was kind of cute when he was flustered, though it was an odd look for such a beastly-looking man.

“What kind of help?” Thea asked, brushing past the beast’s embarrassing moment, which he seemed to appreciate.

“I need your help with the rose,” the beast said with a longing look in the flower’s direction. Thea followed his gaze, noticing the rose was resting on the dining table. “I can’t touch it. My curse demands that someone else utilizes its power, not me.”

Thea approached the flower, her fingers tingling as she brushed the stem. The flower beamed, glowing softly and warming her fingertips as she lifted it in the air. “I see. What are you hoping it will do for you exactly? Break your curse?”

“That’s right.” The beast looked down at his palms, as if too embarrassed to look Thea in the eye when he admitted it, but also needing to remind himself why it needed to be shared. “Believe it or not, my good looks aren’t natural.”

“Well, that’s a pity. The fangs were growing on me,” Thea said with a teasing smile.

“I can always give you a closer look,” the beast warned as he flashed the sharp teeth.

“I have a feeling you’re more bark than bite.” Thea twirled the rose. “You may look like a beast, but you’re not as intimidating as you make yourself out to be.”

“Or you’re too foolish to know when boldness can kill you.”

“True.” Thea shrugged. “I have been known to be a bit impulsive...”

The beast rolled his eyes. “I would have never guessed...”

Thea laughed, then looked back down at the rose clasped between her fingers. This flower could change the beast’s life forever, but what would he do after his curse was lifted? Would he stay in the tunnels? Would he look for an escape?

“May I ask you something?” Thea asked.

“You will, either way.”

“Does your father know that your curse can be broken?” Thea asked, recalling the story he had told her of how Lord Malik hid his son away in his twisted prison.

The beast looked at his claws, finding them far more fascinating than Thea’s question until he finally submitted to replying. “I assume so,” he said softly. “My mother knew; hence why she tried to share with me all she knew in the letter she left me with. I believe my father doesn’t want my curse broken for the same reason he sent men after that rose.”

Thea looked down at the flower, her stomach twisting as she recalled the dark smiles on the hired attackers. “Can the rose undo the labyrinth?”

“I don’t know,” the beast admitted. “But my brother believed it was a key. If that’s true, and it has the power to free someone, even a beast, from the cavern walls...”

“It won’t be inescapable anymore,” Thea finished. “So Lord Malik would rather let his eldest son rot in prison than risk anyone escaping his perfect labyrinth?”

“It seems like an easy choice when the eldest son looks like this,” the beast said as he motioned to his cursed form.

“That shouldn’t matter!” Thea said, her grip tightening on the rose. “Family should come before riches or glory. Ugh! It’s just like that family to do something so repulsive.”

Fire burned through Thea as she imagined Lord Malik carelessly tossing a toddler into the labyrinth like it was some sort of waste disposal. It was no wonder the beast was so grouchy. Thea might have had a difficult life due to her beauty, but the beast had an even worse life due to his curse.

“They’re hardly my family now,” the beast said. “Just an obstacle I have to get over on my attempts toward freedom.”

“*Our* attempts toward freedom.”

“What?”

“I’m going to help you,” Thea explained. “That is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes—”

“Then it’s settled.” Thea set the rose back on the table, then returned to the beast’s bedside. She crouched down on his level, eyes locked on his as she held out her hand to seal the deal. “I’ll help you figure out the rose’s magic and cure your curse so we can escape *together*.”

The beast blinked at her, staring at her hand like it was a foreign object. “I never promised escape was even possible.”

“Then you’ll promise to at least try,” Thea said, swiping his hand and forcing it to shake with hers. His grip was solid, yet far softer than she had anticipated. “We have the key. We just need to figure out how to use it.”

The beast sighed, then tightened his grip on Thea’s, sending an odd flutter down her spine. “Fine, but just because we found the key, doesn’t mean there’s a door.”

He may be right...

Thea finished the handshake, then pulled back, trying to hide the anxious thoughts seeping into her expression. There was at least hope now, and she could work with that.

“If that’s the case, then we’ll just break open our own exit. You deserve to see the sun.”

chapter thirty-one

The beast dabbed at a bead of sweat on his brow. He felt hot. After being completely exhausted from the blood loss earlier, his body seemed to be itching to move now. Fever was starting to creep into his system, but his body was sturdier than most, so he knew he'd be fine. He just had to suffer through the symptoms until it passed.

He watched the girl to try to distract himself, his eyes fixated on the tea leaves as she tossed only a few into the pot at a time. It seemed unlikely that such few leaves would make any difference in a big pot, but she made him promise not to make tea ever again, so he couldn't say much.

He shifted to get a better look, propping up on his elbows, only to regret the movement. Pain shot through his side, causing him to hiss in pain and draw the girl's eyes to him.

"What did I tell you about lying still?" she scolded as she rushed over to lay him back down.

"I'm fine," the beast argued as he swatted her hands away. "I'm a big, strong beast, remember?"

"You're a big, stubborn patient who needs to lie still." Thea pushed past his hands, placing pressure on his shoulders until he returned to lying down. "Now stay. I don't care if you're a beast, a bull, or a dainty little princess; that wound needs to heal, and you'll only make it worse at this rate."

The beast huffed, fighting off the urge to snap at the girl for being so demanding. This was *his* domain, after all. She should be asking him to simply take a step, not raiding his garden to make them both meals, and helping herself to whatever supplies she needed.

She turned her attention back to his wound, then grabbed another strip of fabric to replace the old bandage. The beast groaned through the entire

process, making sure to let her know just how much of an inconvenience all her meddling was.

“Goodness, and I thought Ceyden was whiny,” she scoffed as she secured the new knot. “You’d think a big, strong beast would be better at licking his wounds.”

“Well, you haven’t even given me a chance to try,” the beast said with a grimace. “What about you? You haven’t even touched your own injuries.” The beast looked at the scratch on her cheek and the swollen bruise on her lip. The blood had never even been wiped away from her face, leaving streaks of dark red flecks around the inflamed cut.

“Because they’re hardly injuries,” she said as she stacked the extra scraps of damp fabric that were freshly boiled. “A small cut is hardly anything to fuss over.”

She tried to stand and step away from the bedside, but the beast snagged the end of one of her rags. The tug kept her to the ground, her brows knitting together as she gave him a puzzled look.

“If my injuries are worth fussing over, then so are yours.” The beast studied her cut. It wasn’t large, but it was deep, and the inflammation around the edges meant it was already close to being infected. She couldn’t simply ignore it.

“You’re being ridiculous,” she said as she tried to tug the sanitized rags free. “Let go. I need to hang these up to dry so I can warm them up again later.”

“I’ll let you get up,” the beast said with a cheeky tone sliding into his voice. “After you let me treat your injury.”

“What?”

“Don’t argue now. We wouldn’t want to be a *whiny patient*.”

She scowled, dropping the rag with a narrowed glare. “I am *not* whiny.”

“Good, then you’ll be quiet while I do this.” The beast reached the rag toward her face, half expecting her to pull back or run from his claws.

With her frown still firm, her body remained stiff as she allowed the beast to wipe the rag over her split skin. She flinched when he made contact, proving to the beast that she *was* capable of feeling pain.

He tried to be gentle, focusing on cleaning off the dried blood so he could get a better look at the wound. It was definitely inflamed. Whatever those men used to clean their swords, it must have been as sterile as a pigpen.

“There’s healing root on the left side of the garden,” the beast explained as he set the rag down.

“Healing root?”

“I don’t know what it’s called above the surface, but it’s a medicinal root that can cleanse infections. Dig about five inches into the ground, then bring it to me,” the beast instructed.

He wasn’t sure if she’d bother to listen, but to his surprise, she got up and went hunting in the garden. A few minutes later, she returned with soil-covered hands and a dark gray root in her palm. The beast took the root from her and wiped it clean with one of the damp cloths. The girl kneeled beside him, watching with fascination as he cut up the root with his claws and ground it into a paste between his fingers.

He’d discovered this root as a child when he’d skinned his knees, learning how to run. He wanted a way to relieve the pain, and the ring led him to the root, which he learned was capable of relieving pain and promoting healing. He didn’t use it as much now that he was grown. Pain was a welcome change to his empty world, but that didn’t mean the girl had to suffer.

He smoothed out the paste across his fingertips, then looked back at the girl, who was still watching his every move. He glanced between her cut and his fingers, his chest oddly tight as nerves fluttered in his gut.

“May I?” He nodded toward her cheek.

“Oh, um, sure.” She shifted forward, her sparkling eyes only inches from his as he leaned in close to see what he was doing. “I’ll be still.” She flicked her eyes to his claws.

That’s right, my claws.

He moved with the softest precision, holding his breath as he carefully brushed the pad of his finger against her cheek. He kept a close watch on his claws, performing each touch with as much tenderness as he could to ensure he didn’t prick her skin. Her cheek was so soft around the edges of

the cut, her skin warm and pink. She held perfectly still, not even rigid, as she allowed the beast to coat her injuries in the healing paste. Did she really have that much faith that he wouldn't scratch her?

His fingertips tingled as he brushed her skin. When was the last time he had touched another person that wasn't in a fight? Or the last time he'd touched someone without a shriek or flinch?

I can't remember.

He covered the rest of the wound, then moved toward the swollen part of her lip. He waited before touching her, making sure she didn't want to pull back before he pressed his fingertip against her soft lower lip. She looked up at him through her lashes, and their eyes connected for a moment as his finger lingered on the edge of her mouth. Fairmyth, she was beautiful... Did she even know she looked at people like that?

What am I doing?

He pulled his hand back with a clear of his throat, then wiped off the remaining paste with one of the rags.

"There." He looked down at his hands. "That should help."

"Thank you," she said as she slowly pulled back, her eyes still locked on the beast's like there was a reason she couldn't look away. "That was very kind of you."

The fluttering in the beast's gut returned. "It was just my way of saying thanks... for helping me, I mean. So thanks..." he paused, realizing that after all this time, he still didn't know her name.

"Theabelle." She smiled. "Or Thea for short."

Theabelle...

"You can call me Zared," he said, his throat tightening around the name that he hadn't repeated in years. It was the only memory he retained from outside the labyrinth, "Or just *beast*, if you prefer."

"Zared," she said, testing out the name as if deciding how it felt. "I like that. Thank you for sharing it with me."

"And thank you for sharing yours... I, uh, I'm not really used to using it, but I'm not really used to others looking out for me, either."

Or looking at me at all...

“Just don’t be like your brother and get *too* used to it,” she said with a humored smile. “I don’t need anyone else growing too fond of my assistance.”

Too fond?

“Why?” the beast asked. “Was my brother too reliant on your company?”

Curiosity swam through the beast’s mind as he recalled how his brother had supposedly given Thea the rose. They must have had some sort of connection for him to steal something so valuable for her.

Her cheeks turned red, though he couldn’t tell if it was from anger or embarrassment. Had he said something to upset her?

“I’m going to get some more water.” She stood hastily, grabbing the soiled rags to return to the boiling pot. “And I might take a quick walk.”

The beast blinked, left in the dust as she hurried out of view. Did something happen between her and his brother? He wasn’t sure why, but that fluttering feeling just kept coming back...

chapter thirty-two

Thea's cheeks burned as she disappeared around the corner to the alcove with the water spring. It must have been the paste the beast applied to her cheek; surely it couldn't be anything else.

Not the beast. Zared...

Putting a name to the beast changed so much about how she thought of him. She'd never seen him as a true monster, but now he really felt like a person—a person who was trapped behind a curse his family abandoned him for. It made her sick to think about. She never realized how blessed she was to have a loving family until she was torn away from them forever. Everyone deserved to be loved like that... even beasts.

She could hear the beast shifting on the bed in the other corner of the cave, and she resisted the urge to scold him for moving. She wasn't quite ready to speak with him yet. Not because he'd done anything wrong, but because she couldn't seem to get her heart to stop hammering every time she looked back at those stormy gray eyes.

She bit the edge of her lip, not bothering to budge as her water bowl flowed over and spilled onto the rocky ground. She could still feel his touch brushing against her bruised lip. His claws had come so close to her skin, grazing her as lightly as a butterfly's kiss but never leaving so much as a scratch. Who knew someone so coarse could be so gentle?

Thea's heart started racing again, and she jolted out of her thoughts long enough to stop the bowl from spilling further. She splashed her face with some of the extra water, careful not to wash off the medicinal paste Zared had applied. It felt strange to think of him by his name, but the more she repeated it in her mind, the more she liked it. It suited him and those gray eyes.

What would Zared have looked like if he wasn't cursed?

She tried to imagine it, but all she could picture was Ceyden. She decided she liked his beast form better. It made sense why he wanted to be rid of the curse, but in truth, was it really that bad? He didn't look nearly as terrifying as he believed himself to, but that could always just be her opinion. Those in Olympia were far more judgmental...

She returned to the center of the cave and placed the bowl of water on the table. The rose caught her eye, its petals sparkling in the water's reflection and filling the space with its sweet aroma.

"The flower seems to like you," the beast said from the bed. "Not surprising that the beautiful rose prefers the pretty girl over the ugly beast."

"Ugly? That sounds a little harsh," Thea said, turning around to face him.

"The truth can be harsh."

"Yes, but lies can be much worse." Thea sat down on the stone chair, the cool rock chilling her skin beneath the thin dress. "You look different, sure, but I wouldn't call you ugly."

"You were right about lies," Zared huffed. "The least you can do is be honest. Your eyes work as well as mine. I'm sure my brother doesn't have a snout or hooves."

"No, but he's far more repulsive than you are," Thea said with a roll of her eyes. "And I'm not lying. Sure, you're cursed, but I bet you would have been rather handsome under all that fur."

Zared tilted his head. "Handsome?"

"Well, your eyes are certainly attractive." Thea's chest tightened the moment she said her intrusive thoughts out loud. What was she doing?!

"You think so?" Zared asked, his voice low and surprisingly shy. "I suppose they do look the most human."

Is that why he thinks I like them? Because they're normal?

"They're more than just *human*," Thea explained, pushing aside her embarrassment. "They're transparent. It's like looking through a piece of stained glass. The glass is beautiful and draws your eye even from across the room, but it's really the view you see *through* the glass that leaves you

staring. There's a lot going on behind those eyes, and I find that fascinating."

Zared didn't reply at first, his eyes locked onto Thea's, as if letting her confirm her theory. She felt a little awkward looking at him after she just exposed her inner thoughts, but true to what she said, she couldn't look away, either. It felt like he was staring through her as well, like they were opposing pieces of glass, refracting light back and forth until it was too bright to see.

"Can you tell me more about stained glass?" Zared asked, finally blinking and breaking their gaze. "I've seen broken glass and glass bottles before. It's usually clear or a dark color, and it's also rather sharp and ugly, but the way you describe it sounds so beautiful. I would like to know more about what makes it stained."

Thea smiled, her cheeks warming as she admired the child-like curiosity in his expression. "I would love, to. Maybe I can tell you about other things above the surface while you're stuck in bed recovering."

"I'd like that." Zared attempted a smile, his fangs slightly in the way, but his furry face still brightened. "And maybe you can tell me about tea and how it's meant to be made."

Thea laughed, remembering the strange cup of leaves he had first presented her with. "Only if you promise to take notes. What you last served me was more monstrous than any curse."

"I tried my best!" he argued, but all Thea could do was laugh.

Perhaps unraveling the rose's secrets with him would be fun. Even if they were stuck in the labyrinth, at least she wasn't stuck with any monsters.

chapter thirty-three

The next few days passed like they were all knit together. There was no way for anyone to tell time in the labyrinth, so Thea wasn't sure how long she'd been living in Zared's cave. The labyrinth at least attempted to mimic time, by dimming its natural glow so they could sleep, brightening again when it was time to rise.

Thea made herself a bed against the far wall out of some extra fabrics, just big enough to fit her frame. Zared tried to argue that she should take his bed, but she wouldn't allow him to move until his wound was healed over. It was looking better by the day, but she still worried that the scab would open up if he tried to overexert himself.

She didn't mind being patient. The cavern was full of good crops that kept them both fed, and Zared had been surprisingly good company. She told him stories of the surface, about the different kingdoms, and even about each of her sisters. He loved hearing about her family, though never asked about his own—and she was thankful for that. Now that there was a chance of her surviving the labyrinth, the last thing she wanted to think about was what would happen if she actually escaped.

Ceyden won't forget our deal...

She climbed out of her make-shift bed, stretching to life even though the cavern walls were still dark. She needed to get her thoughts moving to something else.

Thea moved over to the rose, careful not to wake Zared, who was still snoring in his bed. The flower warmed in her touch, and the petals' glow acted like a tiny torch that helped her see where she was going. She stepped over to the wall that acted as the hidden door, trying to hide the rose's glow so it didn't disturb Zared.

"How do you work?" she whispered to the flower.

For the last few days, she and Zared had looked at the bloom from every angle imaginable. She tried talking to it, watering it, holding it upside down, even mapping out the petals like they were some sort of key to escaping the maze. The only thing they were certain about was that it wilted when Zared touched it, and its presence was causing the other roses in the maze to wilt. Thea looked over at one of the rosebushes that grew in the cave. The flowers were all drooping, with half the petals littered on the stone floor.

Seeing them wilt made Zared nervous, like it was some sort of timer that was counting down to the end. Thea wasn't sure what it meant, but she wanted to help Zared. Now that he'd realized she wasn't a threat above or below the surface, he'd been... kind. It was so strange how someone with such a terrible family, living in such miserable circumstances, could have a heart as warm as his.

He deserves to be free.

She leaned against the stone wall, studying the petals like a compass that would hopefully point her to the answer. Nothing looked different, yet she still felt she was missing something every time it warmed in her palm.

"I'm listening," she whispered. "How do I help Zared?"

Footsteps echoed behind her, causing Thea to stiffen until she realized the sound was coming from behind the magic door. Someone was right outside the hidden cavern... they couldn't come in, could they? She pressed her ear to the wall.

"There must be a way out without that blasted flower!"

Thea recognized the voice immediately. The last time she heard it, he was threatening to cut off her fingers. A chill shivered down her spine as she quieted her breathing.

"We've only got a few days left of the food we brought," one of the other men said. "We need to figure something out fast. I wish we had strangled that little girl while we had the chance."

Thea swallowed hard.

"What good would that have done?" the lead snorted. "It's the beast who has the rose. Malik should have given us a better way to find him... How does he expect us to destroy the flower if we can't even find it?"

Destroy the flower?

“Maybe the girl already destroyed it and escaped,” another man groaned. “She might have figured it out after we tried to take it.”

“Nah, Malik said she’d be too cautious to destroy it. She’s still here somewhere... I can feel it in my bones.”

Destroy it and escape? Is that how the rose works?

She looked back at the bloom and the stem grew hot in her hand to the point where she had to drop it with a hiss. She narrowed her eyes on the bloom, trying to figure out what it was trying to tell her. She picked it up again, carefully touching the stem before deciding it was cool to the touch. It made her drop it when she thought of destroying it... Does that mean that’s not the answer?

I bet Malik told them whatever it took to convince them to destroy the key, but still...

“Come on, let’s keep looking,” the leader said. “Or else the only escape from these tunnels will be into Tarteron.”

Tarteron... the deepest and darkest grave of Underworth. She hadn’t thought about it until now, but it made sense that the bodies of the prisoners would be sent there. Or at least the ones that weren’t utilized for skeleton decorations...

“But how do they get there...?” Thea wondered aloud, right as she heard shuffling from inside the cave. The labyrinth’s glow returned, brightening the space a little at a time as she moved back into the center of the room.

Zared was out of bed, standing over the fire and poking it with an old scrap of metal.

“What are you doing up?” Thea asked, causing Zared to jump and clang the metal scrap against the bubbling pot.

“I-I, uh...” He looked between Thea and the pot, eyes wide like a toddler caught with his hands in a cookie jar. “I thought you were still sleeping.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, I can see that.” He sighed, dropping the metal scrap to the ground with a clatter. “I was only trying to make tea... I thought I could

surprise you before you woke up.”

Tea?

“What about your injury?” Thea asked.

“Is that all you ever ask about?”

“Well, someone has to.”

“I feel fine. I’m making tea,” he said pointedly. “Now, would you like some or not?”

Thea debated on whether scolding him was worth it, but he really did look better. “Tea sounds lovely. I have a few questions to ask while you brew it.”

“Questions?” Zared asked as he dropped a few leaves into the bubbling pot. “About what?”

Thea took her spot at the table, folding her hands on top of the stone. “About where the bodies of the prisoners go.”

Zared paused, his silence only filled by the bubbling of the pot. “I dispose of them,” he said solemnly.

“How?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Why don’t you want to share?”

“It’s not exactly the kind of thing a lady should hear about.” Zared scooped a cup into the boiled tea, barely even flinching from the hot water.

“I’m no lady. I’m a convicted prisoner, remember?”

“You look like a lady to me.”

“And since when do *you* judge people based on appearances?”

Zared froze, his claws still half-dipped in the water before he finished scooping out the tea in the second cup. He couldn’t argue that one.

“I receive portals from Underworth’s king,” Zared explained. “He opens them once every few weeks, and I bring the bodies that aren’t too eviscerated to carry.”

Thea’s stomach tightened as she thought about the cracked and beheaded skeletons that lined the tunnels. She guessed some were too much for even a beast to drag around.

“So the portal opens into Underworth?” Thea asked.

“It opens into Tarteron,” Zared said as he placed the cups on the table. “*Directly* into Tarteron. It’s not much of a view.”

But it does lead into Underworth...

“I overheard the men from the other day by the door.” Thea reached for her cup. The tea smelled surprisingly good. Zared had been listening to her instructions, after all. “They were talking about their plans to destroy the rose. They said something about how destroying it would allow them to escape.”

Zared’s gaze drifted to the rose, his expression pondering through the steam of his cup. “I doubt that. It sounds like a trick Malik would use to remove the rose from the playing field.”

“That was my thought, too.” Thea sipped her tea, the warm liquid coating her throat. “They also mentioned another way out... through Tarteron.”

“You mean through death?”

“Well... in most cases, yes.” Thea tapped her fingers on the edge of the cracked cup. “But what if someone who was *alive* went into Tarteron?”

Zared nearly spit out his tea, his eyes wide as he set the cup down with a clear of his throat. “You do know that Underworth is cursed, right? Only those gifted with magic can survive on its soil without having their lifespans sapped.”

“Yes, I’m aware.” Thea fidgeted in her seat, recalling all the scary stories she’d heard about the kingdom as a child.

But they weren’t nearly as scary as the labyrinth stories.

“So what are you really asking?” Zared met her gaze, already seeming to know what she was thinking before she spoke it.

“I’m asking where the portal opens,” she said firmly. “And if I can escape the labyrinth through it.”

chapter thirty-four

She's mad.

"How many times do I have to tell you that escaping the labyrinth isn't that easy?" Zared said.

"I never said this would be easy," Thea argued, folding her arms with that taught curl of her lip that was always more adorable than intimidating. "Underworth is just as dangerous as this maze from what I've been told, not to mention it's ruled by King Hayden and Queen Priscilla, who don't exactly like Olympia."

"And the *curse*," Zared interjected. "Mortals aren't able to survive in Underworth for a reason."

"Yes, I know." Thea looked down at the rose, which seemed to be glowing more by the second. It better not like this idea... "But I wouldn't be there for long. Only until I could get past the border."

Does she hear herself?

"Thea, do you really think you can just *walk out* of Underworth after coming from a portal that leads to the more dangerous prison?" Zared asked, his chest tightening as he imagined Thea stumbling through the life-sucking land. "If you're spotted, they'll likely push you into the pits of Tarteron, dead or alive."

"Well, I'm planning to jump in myself, so what harm can climbing out a second time really do?"

"Thea!"

"Zared! I'm not messing around here."

"Neither am I!" Zared pounded his fist into the table, causing the entire cavern to shake from the force. Thea went silent, and Zared took a few seconds to collect his temper. He hadn't realized she could shake him up so intensely, but he hated the idea of her going into the cursed kingdom when she was already perfectly safe with him. "I'm sorry... I just don't

think it's a good idea. My curse clearly states that I need another person to break it, so if anything happens to you..."

Thea's expression softened, her delicate shoulders sinking as she noticed the unspoken fear in Zared's voice. He couldn't lose Thea... not when they were so close to having all the answers.

"I understand," Thea said softly. "But I don't know where to keep looking from inside these walls. The rose has some sort of deeper meaning to it, but I don't know if we can figure it out on our own. Perhaps the answer is for us to escape the maze first, and then search for the cure for your curse on the outside."

Us... She wants me to leave with her.

"I can't enter Underworth," Zared said solemnly. "I've... I've tried to throw myself into the pits before, but my curse seems to bind me to the labyrinth, or at the very least, prevents me from stepping on the soil of a cursed kingdom."

Thea's eyes went wide, and her lips parted as a mist glossed over her vision. He had never told anyone about his attempts to escape his life before, but then again, he'd never even told anyone his name until Thea...

"Zared..."

"There's still more we can try with the rose," Zared continued, pushing past the discussion of his darkest hours. "Maybe the petals need to be arranged in a certain way? Or perhaps there's a secret word that needs to be whispered to it that will open some secret tunnel? Or maybe—"

"Zared," Thea repeated his name, speaking it so delicately he almost didn't recognize it as his own. She reached out, and to his surprise, took his hand, not even shuddering from his rough skin or jagged claws. "I want to help you."

His heart stuttered. "I want to help you, too. But Underworth is dangerous for mortals, not to mention the portal opens right on the edge of the pit. If you fall in..."

"I won't."

"But if you're caught—"

"I'll be careful."

But what if you don't come back?

The true reluctance he felt smacked him between the eyes as he recognized what really was holding him back. Escaping through the portal could really work... but what would Thea do when she was gone? Would she ever dare return? He tightened his grip on her hand. He wanted to squeeze it until his nerves vanished, but he didn't want to risk harming her with his powerful grip. He expected her to pull away from his touch, but instead, she shifted closer, causing his blood to heat.

"What do you plan to do?" Zared asked.

"Find answers," Thea admitted, looking down at the rose in her grasp. "This key was created by the greatest puzzle maker in the land. The only answers on how it functions will likely come from him, too. I've seen your father's study before. There's a document titled *The Rose and the Labyrinth*, and I have a feeling it explains more of what we need to know."

A document in Olympia...

"I see," Zared bit the inside of his lip, piercing the flesh with his fang. "So you'd travel all the way back home..."

"Yes, if I was able to escape," Thea admitted.

"What about your family? Would you visit them, too?" Zared asked.

"If I'm able," Thea said with a small smile trailing up her lips. "I'm sure they're worried sick about me, if not already mourning me. I'm also rather concerned about them, too. I have no way of knowing whether Ceyden held up his end of the bargain..."

"Bargain?" Zared's bushy brows knotted together. "You made a bargain with my brother?"

Thea's face paled, and her hand slipped from Zared's as she backed up a step with a sigh. "Right, I still haven't mentioned that..." She rubbed her forehead. "Yes, your brother can be quite the negotiator, I'm afraid."

"What did he negotiate?" Something stirred in Zared. Thea had been rather vague about his younger brother, other than mentioning a general distaste for him. He knew that he gave her the rose, but there was clearly more to it.

"He..." Thea took a deep breath. "He's the one who framed my father, and then I took the blame for Father's crime. That's why I'm in the labyrinth."

Zared's eyes widened, his muscles constricting as he recalled all the times Thea claimed she was innocent. It was his *brother* who made her plead guilty?

"He felt bad about it afterward," Thea continued. "In his own sort of way... So he brought me the rose, hoping I could escape with it. But there was one catch... He would watch over my family while I was gone, and if I ever succeeded at escaping, I would have to marry him."

"What!?" Zared gasped, his beastly growl seeping into his voice.

"I know..." Thea pressed her palms over her eyes. "I never wanted to admit it to you."

Thea is betrothed... to my younger brother?

chapter thirty-five

Thea hated saying it out loud. She never would have imagined that her promise to Ceyden would actually have the potential of being fulfilled. Though she also never expected to befriend the labyrinth's blood-thirsty beast.

"I don't understand..." Zared said, his snout flaring as he curled his claws into a fist. "Why would he do something as terrible as framing your father, only to ask you to marry him later?"

"Well..." Thea twirled the rose in her fingers. "He actually asked me to marry him *first*, and when I refused him, he tried to threaten my father as a means to make me agree to his terms."

Zared blinked, his lips parting with his fangs flashing proudly. "Pardon?"

"I said he—"

"No, I heard you." He held up his palm to silence her. "Is *everyone* in my family a selfish piece of scum? My father abandoned me because I didn't fit the form of a perfect son, and now I find out my brother imprisoned an old man to force a woman into marriage?"

"Well, then there's you. You did try to kill an innocent a few times," Thea said, trying to lighten the mood, but only managed to wash a look of guilt over Zared's features. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"No, you're right," he said. "I've been just as selfish. I wanted you dead until I realized you could be of assistance to me. I'm sorry for that."

Thea's chest buzzed, his eyes pouring into hers as his apology filled her like an empty spring. That was the difference between Zared and the rest of his family; he wasn't afraid to admit his mistakes and look to correct them.

If only he had been the brother who stayed on the surface... Ceyden would have made a great beast.

“What about now?” Thea asked him. “Do you still only want me to stay alive because I can help you?”

Zared paused, his hoof scuffing against the dirt as he twirled his claws together. “No...” he said shyly. “I believe you when you say you’re innocent. You never deserved to be sent here, so there’s no reason for me to kill you.”

“Does that mean you’ll help me escape?” Thea asked, her blood heating with hope. Underworth may have been a dangerous escape route, but it was an escape route, nonetheless. With Zared’s help, she could be the first to ever escape the labyrinth.

“I...” Zared took a long breath. “What about Ceyden? If you escape, you’ll have to fulfill your promise to him.”

A shudder rolled down Thea’s spine at the thought, but she knew he was right. Ceyden could easily find her with his gift if he wanted to. She wouldn’t be able to avoid him.

“I know...” she admitted. “But that doesn’t matter as much as it used to. Right now, there’s a chance we can decipher the rose’s magic and break your curse.”

“Yes, but at the cost of your freedom,” Zared said, his tone growing low and growly. “Maybe I don’t want you to exchange your life for mine.”

What?

“Why not? I thought you wanted to be human again?” Thea asked.

Zared didn’t answer at first, like he couldn’t quite piece together his thoughts into words, no matter how desperately Thea wanted to hear them.

“I don’t want you to go,” Zared said under his breath. “It’s not worth your life. You could either lose it in Underworth, or lose it to my brother.”

Frustration burned through Thea, her shoulders growing stiff as she tightened her grip on the rose. She felt her cheeks grow red. Why was he being so stubborn about this? She was trying to help him!

“Well, maybe I don’t want to stay. Did you ever think of that?” Thea huffed. There was no point in her sitting around doing nothing when there was an opportunity to help him. Why couldn’t he see that?

“You don’t?” His voice cracked, broken up by what Thea thought was another growl, but she couldn’t quite make it out.

“Maybe I want to see my sisters again,” Thea said. “Or maybe I’m not afraid of dying in Underworth, as opposed to—”

“Dying with me?” His tone turned grim.

“What? No, I just meant—”

“I get it. The labyrinth and my company are too insignificant to you now that you’ve survived.”

“Zared, I didn’t mean it like that. I just don’t think there’s anything I can do here to help.”

He turned away, his dark shadow blanketing the wall behind him as he stared straight at it. “That’s where we disagree...” he said softly. “I’m sorry, Thea. I won’t help you through the portal. I can’t.”

“Zared!”

“That’s final.”

“But I’m doing it for you!”

“And I told you I don’t want you to!” he snarled, whipping his head around to bare his fangs. Thea jumped; it was the first time since they met that he had truly startled her. He stepped back. “The fact that you’re still pushing means it’s really for yourself. Who knows, maybe you actually want to marry my brother. I’m sure he’s far prettier to look at than me.”

“Zared, don’t say such things!” Thea reached out for him, but he pulled back before she could touch his arm. Her heart twisted, burning with anger and hurt as he shut her out. “Fine... If you want to be left alone, then so be it. It’s not like you don’t know where to find me if you want to. I am your prisoner, after all...”

Thea stormed toward the door, waiting for the magic wall to vanish and then stepping out into the unshielded tunnels of the labyrinth. She didn’t know where she was going, but she’d been in that cave long enough. If Zared couldn’t realize that she was trying to help him, then he was beyond saving.

If only he trusted me... I really think I could break the curse.

She looked down at the rose that was still pinched in between her fingers, noticing the petals had dimmed as if reflecting her mood. She wasn’t sure if she said the right things to Zared, but he hadn’t been much better. If he wanted her help, then he shouldn’t tell her what she could do.

He either needs to see her as an ally or a prisoner, not both.

Maybe we can talk through it better later. Being angry won't fix anything.

“Well, would you look what we have here?” A low, raspy voice froze Thea in place, the rose burning in her grip as she turned toward the voice. “It’s about time we found you.”

No...

The men from earlier stood in front of her, looking far more ragged than before and about a hundred times more bloodthirsty. She hadn’t realized how far she’d walked. Where was she? Where was the cave from here? She looked down at the rose, noticing the glow was pulsing like a panicked heartbeat.

The leader looked down at the rose, a twisted smile curling up his lips. “And look, you’ve brought us a gift.”

chapter thirty-six

Thea's heart pounded like a stampede. The men had her pinned in their sights, each one looking more ready to tear out her throat than the next. How many days had they been searching for her? Two? Three? A week? She had lost all sense of time in the tunnels, but they looked about a hundred times worse than when she first encountered them.

Their hands and faces were covered in dirt, their eyes dark from lack of sleep, and each one gripped their weapon with enough power to crush even a beast's skull. Only two of the men were armed since Zared had destroyed one of the swords, and Thea stole the other one, but she wouldn't put it past the other two to strangle her with their bare hands.

"This doesn't have to be difficult," the leader said, his voice as gravelly as the dirt under their boots. "Just hand over the flower and we might even let you starve to death on your own."

The rose... they'll destroy it.

Thea clutched the flower against her chest, its warm pulses synching with her crazed heart. If they destroyed the rose, then any hope of curing Zared would be gone with it.

"I can't let you destroy it." Thea tried to sound brave, but it was difficult while looking at the filthy edge of a sharpened blade. "The rose is our only hope of escape. If you destroy it, then—"

"We know what happens when we destroy it..." the man with the beard hissed. "Which is exactly why we need to do it. Now hand it over, or we'll cut it out of your dainty little fingers." He took a step forward.

"Wait!" Thea held up her hand, her lungs constricting around the word as she prayed that they would hear her out. The men paused for a moment, but they were itching to pounce. "Lord Malik lied to you! You have to believe me. He wants you to destroy the rose so *no one* ever escapes. It's

true that the rose is the key to something, but it's alive. If the magic in it is snuffed out, then we'll never know how it can help us!"

"Are you daft?" the leader snorted. "We know what the blasted flower does! We don't need you trying to twist our minds so you can have its power all for yourself."

"But I'm not twisting anything!"

"Oh?" The leader narrowed his eyes, tracing his finger along the dusty blade. "Lord Malik told us all about your trial. We know how you tried to poison the lord for revenge, and then coaxed your dear father into taking the blame. It wasn't until the guilt overran you that you finally decided to confess the truth. Clearly, you have no issue manipulating the lives and minds around you to get what you want. You even persuaded the beast to keep you alive."

"Probably by promising him an escape with the rose," one of the men huffed. "That's why she hasn't used it yet. She's been trying to shake off the monster so she can escape on her own."

"That's not true!" Thea tried to argue, but it was no use. They had already decided what to make of her, and they didn't look interested in being persuaded.

"Once a liar, always a liar," the leader tsked. "Now, hand over the flower. We don't want to mutilate that pretty face, but we will."

I can't let them take it... Zared has waited too long for the hope it's brought him.

The second she tried to turn around, the leader slashed his blade at her. She held up her hands in defense, backing up just enough to avoid being slashed in two, but still getting her palm nicked by the sword's tip.

She ran, begging her legs to move faster than they ever had, dodging fallen stones and dips in the ground to run as smoothly as she could. The labyrinth guided her without her even asking, illuminating the paths she needed to take. The men were right behind her, fueled by their days of endless searching and the desire not to lose sight of her again.

Her lungs puffed, the stale cave air burning in her chest as she forced every ounce of energy she could find into her sprint. The rose pulsed against her chest, acting like a warning bell that encouraged her not to

slow down. Blood ran down the rose's stem, staining the dark green leaves from the fresh cut on her palm. It wasn't deep, but every drop it left probably acted as a trail for the men to follow.

Pain ripped through her as a stitch tore into her side. She hissed through the pain, reminding herself of what the consequences would be if she let them catch her.

Zared will lose everything...

She wasn't sure why that pained her so much. She'd barely even known the beast, yet he'd already shown her more kindness than anyone other than her family ever had. He may have been coarse and had a short temper, but he didn't deserve to spend his life cursed and alone in a labyrinth.

I have to keep the rose away from those men, but they're so close...

"Labyrinth?" Thea called into the tunnel walls, unsure if it even understood words. "I don't know if you can hear me, but I need you to help me hide the rose."

She kept her voice low, trying to ensure that her plans didn't echo behind her. The rose flared in her hands, responding to her request in a manner that Thea couldn't quite translate.

"Please. Don't let the men find it. I don't care what happens to me," Thea begged as she darted around another corner, her lungs feeling on the verge of collapsing, "just make sure the beast finds the rose!"

She felt the rose heat in her palm, but there was no time to try to interpret what it was trying to say. At the next crossroad she came to, she threw the rose as far as she could down one of the paths, then darted down the opposing one, ensuring her steps were loud enough for the men to follow. She held her breath, waiting to hear the echo of their feet behind her.

They're still behind me.

They weren't quite as close, but they were gaining on her as her energy depleted. All she could do now was hope the rose wouldn't be discovered by the men before the beast.

"Please," Thea begged the labyrinth again. "Don't let them find that tunnel."

She tried to gain as much distance between her and the flower as she could. The labyrinth had great power, but she never knew if it took special requests from the beast's favored prisoners. She stumbled over a rough patch of ground, gasping as the motion slowed her down.

"Over there!" a panting breath called behind her, and Thea forced all her strength into pushing forward a few more steps.

I can't do it...

Her legs burned, her heart was ready to beat free from her chest, and every breath she took was shallower than the last. She staggered forward a few steps, making one last silent plea to the labyrinth to protect the rose before a rough pair of hands grabbed her from behind.

"I got her!" the leader gasped, his sour breath heating her neck as he pinned her arms behind her. "Immobilize her, quick!"

Thea's eyes were fuzzy, still lightheaded from her run. Despite the blurred vision, she could still see the rock in the man's palm. She closed her eyes, hoping the shock would cancel out the pain as she whispered under her breath.

"Good luck, Zared."

The rock met her skull.

chapter thirty-seven

“It’s her fault for wanting to be so reckless!” Zared growled as he paced around the hidden cave. “She should know better than to want to go prancing through Underworth. There’s a reason mortals fear it!”

The labyrinth seemed to be blinking at him, the natural glow fading in and out like it was punctuating his anger... or arguing against him.

“Don’t tell me I’m wrong!” he snapped at the walls. “We both know how horrid that kingdom looks from the portal, plus it opens right at the edge of the pit. What if she fell in? What if her life was drained before she could make it past the border?”

The maze walls continued to flash at him. It was starting to get annoying at this rate...

“I don’t care if you’re angry at me. I won’t let her do it.” Zared sank into one of the stone chairs, crossing his arms as he looked at the floor to try to get a break from the flashing glow. “She already sacrificed her life once for her father she shouldn’t have to do it again for me. I know she said she wanted to...”

His chest tightened. He didn’t want to believe that was true. Did Thea truly *want* to marry his brother? Did she prefer the comfort of a man who could actually hold her without risking tearing her flesh with a handful of claws? He wondered if she’d even admit it if it was true...

“She said she doesn’t like him,” Zared reasoned with himself, looking down at his sharp talons. “So why is she so determined to get back to him? If it’s truly for my sake, then I just can’t let her do it... I can’t see her unhappy after all she’s done.”

He pressed a palm to his furry forehead, letting out a long sigh as he clacked his hooves on the floor. He’d never had a prisoner get into his head the way Thea did. Was it because she wasn’t really a criminal? Or because she was kind to him?

Or because she was just herself?

His blood burned as he thought about her tender hands dressing his wound, carefully tending to him as if he was made of glass, despite being built from the sturdiest magic. She'd never treated him like a monster unless he acted like one, and he'd definitely acted like one earlier...

"I'm the jerk, aren't I?" Zared looked up at the ceiling, and the cavern continued to flicker, growing faster like a pulsing heart. "I'm guessing that's a yes."

Zared groaned, then looked down at the cup that still held the lukewarm cup of unfinished tea he'd made. He may have made the tea, but it was Thea who made him believe he could. He had all the pieces and ingredients to put it together, but on his own, he was never enough. He still needed Thea. Not just for making tea, but for unwinding the curse that he had given up on until she arrived. If Thea thought going to Underworth was the way to set him free...

"I need to talk to her again," Zared groaned. "And... apologize. She might be right about the portal, even if I don't like it."

He stood from his seat, his head starting to ache from the flashing in the cave. Why was it still going crazy when he was done arguing with it? Maybe the ring would be more helpful.

"Take me back to her," he told the ring. It only took a second for the magic to come to life, guiding him out of the hidden cavern and into the tunnels. He followed the ring's direction as closely as he could, but for whatever reason the labyrinth kept blocking his paths.

The ring wanted him to go left, but rocks blocked the tunnel, then it wanted him to go straight, but a rosebush had climbed too tall to pass through.

"What's the meaning of this?" he asked the walls. "I'm trying to get back to Thea. Where are you taking me?"

The labyrinth had stopped flashing, filling the tunnels with an eerie glow that sent a rush of nerves through Zared's chest. He walked faster. He wasn't sure why, but something felt off. He looked down at the ring, feeling the gold burn around his finger as he begged it to take him to the thing he wanted most.

Thea. Where is Thea?

He started to run. Something wasn't right. Why was the tunnel not responding to him? Why was the ring struggling to take him to what he wanted?

"Thea!" he called, his heart racing as he darted around the next corner, his hooves clacking with a deafening echo. "Thea—"

His voice snagged in the back of his throat as his eyes went wider than one of King Hayden's portals.

"No..."

Lying in the middle of the path was the enchanted rose, coated in blood. He picked up the rose and immediately felt his entire body crush in on itself. Thea had been holding the rose when she left... What happened!?

"Take me to Thea!" he shouted into the labyrinth, demanding both the maze and the ring to guide him. "Now!"

The maze didn't resist after that. It illuminated the same tunnels the ring pointed him toward, and cut every corner possible. For whatever reason, the labyrinth wanted him to find the rose first. Was it because it didn't want him to lose the key?

Blast the key, where is Thea!?

He ran around another corner, feeling his entire body go cold as he spotted the limp body lying beside a bed of roses. Thea's face was turned away from him, but he could already see the blood trickling from the back of her head.

"Thea!" He rushed to her side, kneeling into the dirt and scooping her into his arms as he searched for any signs of life. "Thea, wake up! What happened? Tell me who did this to you!"

He felt he already knew, but he needed to know more. He needed to hear her voice, needed to see her eyes open. She couldn't die... not here, not ever.

He placed his claw under her nose, checking for the steam of breath.

She's still breathing.

Her injury was bad, and there was no telling what a blow to the head like that could do to her, but Zared wasn't going to sit around, waiting to

find out. He scooped her into his arms, holding her close to his chest to warm her as best as he could. He dropped the rose onto her lap, the bloodstained flower blending in with her newly-stained dress.

“You’re going to be all right,” he whispered, nuzzling his chin against her head as he pulled her close. “Just don’t leave me. I can’t go back to being alone.”

“Hey, look, The beast found our rose!” The gravelly voice of Thea’s attacker scraped through Zared’s mind like claws against flesh. “Why don’t you hand it over before you end up like your little friend there?”

They did this...

Zared placed Thea back on the ground, his heart tearing away with her as he pulled away. He made sure to be gentle with her head. “This will be quick, I promise,” he whispered to her motionless form. “Then you’ll be safe.”

“Safe?” the leader scoffed, his every word twisting the tension in Zared’s chest tighter, until he was ready to unleash his full fury. “No one is safe down here, beastly. Not even you. Now hand over the rose before—”

He fell quiet. The only sound being the *thud* of his body as it smacked against the stone floor.

chapter thirty-eight

Thea's head pounded like there was an army of hammering men trying to smash their way out of her skull. She blinked her eyes open, her lashes sticking together from what must have been a long sleep. Nausea instantly washed over her. The pain was terrible, knocking against her brain and drilling into her thoughts from all angles.

What happened?

She reached for her aching forehead, then jumped when her hand touched something cool and damp. There was a cloth stretched across her forehead. It must have been fresh, because it was blissfully cool compared to her warm skin. She decided to leave the rag in place and tried to get a better bearing on where she was. Her last memories came trickling back to her in slow, painful flashes. She remembered running, tossing aside the rose, and then...

Smack.

She winced as the memory of the rock hitting her skull resonated through her bones. They didn't even hesitate to hit her with everything they had. It was a miracle she was awake now. They must have narrowly avoided hitting her hard enough to kill.

So if I'm not dead... then where am I?

The first thing she noticed was the soft padding underneath her. She looked down, careful not to let the cool rag slide off her forehead as she got a better look at what she was lying on. Her vision was still a little blurry, but it only took a glance for her to recognize it as Zared's bed.

I'm back in the cave?

Her vision started to clear up after that, and she quickly recognized the sanctuary of the hidden cave and the smell of the freshwater spring that filled the room with a light mist. The smokey smell of the fire flooded the room, too. Standing over the flames, tending the fire with his usual

scrap of metal, was the beast himself, looking more solemn than he had when she first met him.

“Z-Zared?” Thea squeaked, testing her voice for the first time in who knew how long.

Zared dropped the scrap of metal, his neck nearly snapping from how fast he turned to look at her. “Thea!” He rushed to her side, his heavy steps clacking on the stone before he kneeled beside the bed and consumed her with those vibrant eyes. “You’re awake! Thank Fairmyth... I was so worried. How do you feel?”

It should have been a simple question, but Thea could hardly focus on herself when she was so distracted by Zared’s haggard appearance. He’d always been a bit scruffy and rough around the edges, but he looked completely depleted now. His eyes were missing their usual light, shadowed by what must have been either exhaustion or trauma. His fur was knotted around his horns—where he usually rubbed his head when he was frustrated—and even his voice felt fragile, like he was worried he might crack even further.

“I’ve been better,” Thea said as she attempted to sit up in bed, only for Zared to gently hold her back down.

“Don’t move, you took a nasty blow to the head and are probably dizzy,” Zared commanded, lightly pressing on Thea’s shoulder until she eased back onto the pillow.

Wait, pillow?

Zared’s bed had never had a pillow before, but underneath Thea’s head was something soft and gentle on her skull. She noticed it was sloppily sewn together with what appeared to be thread harvested from old fabric, but whatever it was stuffed with was so much softer than any fabric, and it smelled like...

“Roses?” Thea guessed out loud.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is the scent bothering you?” Zared asked.

“No, not at all. I just wasn’t sure if that’s what I was smelling. Are they in the pillow?”

“Ah, yes,” Zared answered shyly as he twirled his claws together. “There aren’t a lot of soft things down here, even within my collection. So,

I harvested some of the rose petals from the other bushes and tried to make you a pillow. I hope it's not too uncomfortable."

He harvested his roses? The ones he nearly killed me over when we first met?

Thea's heart stuttered, the floral smell becoming sweeter by the second as she imagined Zared hand plucking each petal from his precious bushes.

"You didn't have to go to such lengths for me," Thea said between flutters in her stomach. No one had ever done something so kind for her... "You loved those roses."

"I loved the hope they gave me," Zared said in a somber tone, his eyes latched to Thea's like she was the only sun in the dark caverns. "Ever since you arrived, my hope has been placed elsewhere. The roses meant nothing compared to helping you recover."

He reached for her forehead to brush a stray hair from her eyes, using the edge of his claw to gently smooth it away from her skin. The touch tickled, jolting tingles across her head that distracted her from the lingering pain. She loved how sweet his touch could be, even with the threat of his claws. His fingers lingered on the side of her face for a moment, his skin warm and soothing in the drafty cave. She didn't want him to pull away, her hand itching to reach out and touch his face in exchange. Would he even let her touch his face?

"I'm so relieved you're all right," Zared's deep voice nearly cracked as he slowly withdrew his touch. "When I found the rose, I wasn't sure what to think. I was terrified something had happened to you, and when I found you..." He clenched his fists, his muscles tightening like a compressed spring. "Those men were despicable..."

"Were...?" Thea breathed, her curiosity getting the better of her as she wondered what happened to her attackers.

"They won't hurt anyone ever again," Zared said coldly, sending a tense chill down Thea's spine. "They may not have been sent into the labyrinth for committing a crime, but the evil they did was just as deserving of punishment. I'm sorry, Thea. I couldn't let them hurt anyone ever again—either inside the labyrinth or outside of it."

He looked ashamed, yet at the same time he didn't seem to regret what he had done. In truth, Thea wasn't sure how to perceive Zared's actions. He was an executioner, after all. His purpose in the labyrinth was to grant a swift end to those who were no longer permitted to live a natural life.

"Thank you for protecting me." Thea said, reaching out for Zared's hand. She just needed to connect to him somehow. Needed to prove she wasn't angry at him for defending what he cared about. "I'm sorry you were placed in that position."

His touch softened in hers, and in that moment, nothing about him felt inhuman at all. His hand may have been bigger and his palm a bit rougher, but everything about him felt as normal as could be. She wanted to help him break his curse, yet there was also nothing wrong with him as he was now.

"You left the rose..." he said as he tightened his grip on her hand. "Was it an accident, or..."

"I couldn't let them find it," Thea answered before he could fully ask, her heart squeezing in sync with his tensed hand. "I know what that rose means for you... If they destroyed it—"

"That shouldn't have mattered." Zared shook his head, his horns waving in shadows from the firepit's glow in the background. "My life should never have mattered. Why is it so hard for you to be selfish?"

Thea thought back to her family, and how she had sacrificed her life to secure her father's freedom. It was easy to look at it like a selfless act, but in truth, that was far from it.

"I am selfish," Thea said. "I abandoned my family for the sake of my pride, and I abandoned the rose because I was too weak to see your last hope crushed. Dying would have been easier than living with seeing you suffer."

"Who said I was suffering?" Zared asked, his tone light and wistful. "Thea, I didn't want you to go into Underworth, because for the first time in my existence, I didn't feel like I was on my own. I was selfish, too, because I didn't want to lose you. Staying cursed seemed like a small price to pay."

He'd rather remain cursed than risk losing me through the portal?

Thea shifted upward, just enough to raise her head, but not enough for Zared to complain about her moving too much. The cool cloth slid off her forehead, and she noticed there was healing root paste smeared on the inside of it. He had done so much for her... She couldn't fight the urge to do something in return, yet...

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Thea asked. "Here, in the labyrinth, as long as life allows us?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you're afraid of me leaving." Thea met his eyes, her heart squeezing the more he dove into her gaze. "I never planned on leaving the labyrinth once I entered. My family should be provided for in my absence, and I doubt Lord Malik will send more men to kill me since he never planned for the first group to make it out alive. If you want me to stay with you, just say the word."

She brushed her finger along his palm, imagining a life spent with only one other person to share her thoughts. This wasn't what she had anticipated to find in the labyrinth, but she was glad that she had. All she ever wanted was a simple life, and protection for her family. She had that here. As long as Ceyden kept his promise, her family would be safe, and Thea never had to fulfill her oath to marry him if she never escaped. She could be happy here, forever sharing stories about the surface with Zared and basking in the magic of the labyrinth.

This was enough.

Zared was enough.

"I want that..." Zared sighed, his tone both longing and reluctant. "But I've been selfish for long enough. The rest of my family may be able to cave into their desires, but I don't want to be like them."

"What do you mean?" Thea blinked at him, unsure what he was trying to imply.

"The portal to Tateron should open in a few days," Zared's tone shifted, his expression growing serious as he let out a long-held breath. "If you're feeling well enough by then, I want you to escape through it with the rose."

chapter thirty-nine

Sending her away was the most crushing feeling Zared had experienced since being trapped in the labyrinth as a child, but even that wasn't enough for him to hold Thea back. He gathered supplies for her, throwing together a small bag of food and other items in case she needed them on her journey back to Olympia. She tried to tell him she didn't need anything, but he refused to tell her where the portal opened without it. She finally accepted, and they stepped out of the cavern's hidden section to venture out into the maze.

"Are you sure about this?" Thea asked, her fingers twisting tightly around the rose. "Once I leave..."

"I know," Zared said, not willing to hash out everything that could go wrong now that he'd made up his mind. "Ultimately, it's up to you, but I won't hide the door from you if you so choose to exit."

Thea went quiet after that, and Zared hoped it was because she was feeling confident and not afraid. There was no telling how quickly the curse of Underworth could sap her life. It affected everyone differently from what Thea explained, and it favored those with magic. He hoped that meant the rose could help keep her safe, or at the very least provide her guidance like it had in the tunnels.

They reached a dead end, and Zared's ring warmed with the softest buzz, alerting him that he had found what he was looking for.

"Here it is," Zared said, his voice echoing against the corners of the cave.

"Will it show up later?" Thea asked, reaching out to touch the cool wall.

"Yes, but it never appears in the same place twice," Zared explained. "The labyrinth is always changing, so not even King Hayden can keep track of where the portal needs to appear. On some occasions, it hasn't

even found its way into the maze at all, but usually, it sticks to one of the walls.”

“I see,” Thea said as she pulled her hand back. She looked so much better now after a few days of rest. There was still a decent sized lump hiding under her dark hair, and she still didn’t get out of bed too quickly, but she seemed to be back to her normal self otherwise. “I suppose this is where we say goodbye, then.”

Zared’s heart sank to his hooves, but he forced a smile on his face. He couldn’t let her see how much it hurt to let her go. She deserved to be free. Unlike the other prisoners that were sent to these tunnels, she hadn’t committed a crime worthy of staying trapped. It would be so easy to keep her here... so easy to ask her to stay for just a little longer. But, even if he couldn’t fully admit it to himself, he knew he had grown to care for her. So much so, he wanted her freedom even if it meant his solitude.

“I need you to promise me something, Thea,” Zared said, his eyes drifting to the rose. “Once you leave, I need you to promise me that you’ll never return unless you have a way to get out again.”

Thea’s eyes widened, fluttering Zared’s stomach as he gazed into her stunning irises. “But what if I figure out how to cure you?” she asked. “I don’t want to make you wait a moment longer if I—”

“Please.” Zared reached for her hand, and she easily accepted it without so much as a flinch at his claws. “Don’t give up your freedom for me anymore than you already have.”

Thea bit her lip, then shifted closer so only the width of the rose stood between them. “Then I’ll find a way for us both to escape,” she said boldly. “The answers to the rose are in Olympia, I’m certain of it. Once I make it out of Underworth, I promise I’ll do whatever it takes to break your curse, then break you out.”

Zared smiled. Just hearing those words was enough. He might be alone once Thea left, but he would always have the memories to keep him company—not to mention, a new hope to cling to... He didn’t need a rose to give him purpose. There was someone right in front of him who was willing to fight for his life, so he was ready to fight for it, too.

“I’ll be waiting.” He lifted his hand to her cheek, his massive palm encompassing almost the entire side of her face as she leaned into his

touch. “Just please stay safe. Even if you don’t come back, I’ll be all right so long as you’re still well.”

She deserves to live her life again, even if it’s a life without me.

“I *will* come back,” Thea said. “Either because I found a way to set you free, or because I murdered your brother after he forced me to marry him.”

Zared laughed. He’d miss having her stubbornness around.

“You laughed,” Thea smiled. “You don’t smile very often, but I’m glad I got to see it again before I left. I can’t wait to see it again, soon.”

Don’t say that, Thea. Don’t make me hope I’ll have you back.

Zared pulled his hand away, his heart jumping as he remembered the last thing he had hoped to do. He looked at the golden ring on his finger, the only gift from his mother, which had shown him everything he wanted, but could rarely have. He tugged the ring off and held it out to Thea.

“I want you to take this.”

“Your ring?” Thea stared at the gold. “I can’t take that. It’s too precious.”

“Do you remember what this ring does?” Zared asked.

“You said it guides you to what your heart wants most in the moment,” Thea said, repeating what he had explained to her during their time in the caves.

“That’s right, so once you leave. It will forever be useless to me.” He took Thea’s hand, then uncurled her fingers to place the ring in her palm. “The only thing I’ll want to find is you, Thea, but I won’t be able to search beyond the walls.”

“Zared...” Thea breathed, her eyes misty as they remained latched on him.

“If you ever want to find me again within these tunnels, it will guide you back to me,” Zared continued. “Until then, it will help you find what you’re looking for on the surface.”

Thea looked at the ring. It seemed so small in her dainty hands. She slid it onto her thumb, then curled her fingers to hold it close to her palm.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I promise to take good care of it until I’m back.”

“If you come back,” Zared said through another painful smile. “Remember your promise.”

“When I come back.”

“Always so stubborn.” He was going to miss that.

The faint smell of smoke interrupted their conversation, and a second later, a small blue flame flickered on the wall. The flame grew brighter, then ever so slowly, trailed into a ring to create the shape of the portal.

“It’s time,” Zared said with a heavy heart. “Once the ring of fire is completed, a portal will open through the smoke. It doesn’t stay open for long, so you’ll want to be quick, but careful. There are usually only a few inches of the cliff available before it goes straight into the drop.”

“Got it.” Thea nodded as she tightened her grip on the rose. She tucked the bag of supplies Zared had given her over her arm, then took a long breath as she stared into the circling flames. She looked back at Zared, her eyes sparkling in the light of the blue fire. “Time flows differently in Underworth.”

“That’s right,” Zared said, unsure what she was getting at only moments before she needed to cross through the portal.

“Which means that even if I do make it out, it could be days or even weeks longer for you than it will be for me,” she thought aloud, her eyes watering as she stared straight through Zared’s crushed soul.

That’s right... There’s no telling how Underworth’s curse will warp time while she’s gone.

“It will be all right.” Zared tried to sound reassuring, but his gut was twisting at the thought of never knowing how long he might be waiting. Perhaps it was best if he just treated this goodbye like it was truly their last... “I’ll be waiting either way. Don’t worry about me.”

Thea shifted closer, one hand curled tight around the rose while the other twirled the gold ring on her finger. The portal was nearly completed, but she didn’t seem rushed. Instead, she took her time inching closer, silently closing the distance between them as the crackle of the flame echoed behind Zared’s pounding heart.

She was so much shorter than him, but he could tell she was focusing on his face. He knelt on one knee, meeting her eyes on equal ground like when they both took turns lying injured in bed.

“Be safe, Zared.” Her lashes fluttered closed, and Zared shut his eyes as her soft lips gently pressed against his forehead. She didn’t shudder at his fur or his horns, and she didn’t even jump back when the portal completed with a puff of thick smoke. She lingered in the moment, letting it last so Zared could savor it for the eternity of solitude that awaited him. He didn’t want this to be their last goodbye, but if that’s what it was, it was more than enough for him to cherish forever. “Don’t lose faith in me, all right?”

“I won’t,” Zared promised, his voice barely a breath as she pulled away and turned toward the portal.

The pits were dark and looming, but just like before, there was the slightest edge of the cliff that marked the start of the grave. Thea took a deep breath, then stepped through, one foot at a time. Her foot wobbled a bit on the cliff, and Zared winced when he heard a few rocks crumble off the edge. She planted her second foot, barely balancing on the cliff’s edge as she turned back to look at Zared one more time through the smokey opening.

“Goodbye, Theabelle.”

chapter forty

Thea looked back through the portal, her heart shrinking with the magical opening as Zared's goodbye tunneled into her. Why'd it hurt so much to leave him? Shouldn't she be happy that she found a way out?

She reached a hand toward the smoke, feeling the desire to reach out one final time to Zared before leaving him behind. The smoke got thicker, and Zared's image faded, until all she was touching was the open air. Her heart tightened, squeezing all the way up in her throat as she wished she could have taken him with her... He deserved to see the sun.

Now it's my job to make that happen.

Her feet wobbled on the edge of the cliff. She didn't dare look over the edge, knowing that she might swoon if she saw how deep it went. She shifted forward, barely picking her feet up off the ground until she was a safe distance away from the treacherous edge. The moment she was clear of falling, she took a deep breath and realized her newest dilemma.

The tightness in her chest wasn't just from the pain of leaving Zared. Her heart was racing like mad. She pressed a hand over her chest, startling herself when she noticed how much the beats kept increasing. Her blood moved faster, and her head felt dizzy like it did when she first woke up from her injury. It was like her entire body was racing itself, trying to move faster to keep up with the strange flow of time.

This must be Underworth's curse. I need to get out of here.

There were portals everywhere, each dumping out bodies that were either being stacked in piles or collected by nymphs, who appeared to be working. Her best chance at escape would be to jump into another portal, but there was no telling where she would end up. It could be anywhere from Olympia, to Mortalia, to the bottom of the ocean for all she knew. She started racing toward one, but skidded to a stop when she noticed it was already starting to close. She looked for another, but everywhere she turned, the portals were fizzling out. They must have already completed

their shipments, and just like the portal to the labyrinth, didn't stay open for long afterward.

How am I supposed to get out of here?

Her heart pounded, and she pressed the rose to her chest to try to stifle the sound of its throbs. This couldn't be good for her. She needed an escape, or help or, magic...

The ring!

"Take me somewhere safe," she begged the ring, hoping that was what she truly wanted most in that moment. The ring warmed, and a second later she felt a tugging sensation in her thumb, as if someone was pulling her along in a specific direction. She followed the ring, stepping over the cracked ground and being careful not to trip on the occasional bone.

Underworth served as a mass graveyard for all of Fairmyth, since its curse allowed bodies to decompose faster. The entire kingdom felt like it was from another world, with dreary gray skies that made it feel like night, and a dusty ground that had little to any life growing throughout it. Mortals were never allowed in the kingdom due to how the curse conflicted with their lifespans, and now Thea truly understood why.

This isn't good. I need to hurry or else—

"Pardon me, miss?" a strange voice called out behind Thea, causing her heart to skip at least three of its rapid beats as she whirled around. It was a water nymph, at least she assumed so. He was tall and lanky, with pale skin and shadowed eyes that almost made him look more dead than alive. "I don't mean to frighten you. My name is Callum; I work for King Hayden and I don't believe I've seen you around before."

Thea gulped. He works for the *king*?

"Tell me, miss," Callum asked, eyeing Thea up and down, "are you mortal?"

"Y-yes," she stammered. Maybe he would help her get out of the kingdom faster, so long as he didn't question where she came from.

"I suspected so," Callum said as he looked down his narrow nose at her. "You came from a portal, didn't you?"

Thea didn't answer, she wasn't even sure if she could if she tried. Her blood felt like was on fire from the friction of it rushing through her veins.

“I see...” Callum said, filling in his own answer as he reached out and placed a calm, but firm, hand on Thea’s shoulder. “I’m going to need you to come with me, miss. King Hayden will need to address your presence here.”

“But I—”

“It will be quick,” he cut her off, pushing her along without allowing any further argument.

Thea bit her lip, unsure what to do now that she was in the custody of another kingdom’s official. Should she lie about where she came from? Tell the truth about how she faked being a criminal? From what rumors said, King Hayden had a general distaste of Olympia and his brother King Zion, so maybe he would be willing to listen to her in regard to how their justice system had failed her.

If I can last that long...

She felt sick. Her chest was winding tighter, and her head was feeling lighter by the second. Callum was at least truthful about being quick. In a matter of minutes, she was rushed inside the massive castle that took up most of Underworth’s view. The floors were cold, and the halls were dark and echoey, but it wasn’t nearly as creepy as she always imagined as a child. Callum rushed her to a long corridor, eyeing the rose in her hand with a suspicious lift of his brow before turning to knock on a tall heavy door.

“Wait here,” he said with a clear of his throat. “I will speak to the king and see if he needs to see you.”

Thea nodded, her hands shaking as she squeezed the rose so hard it would have snapped had it not been magical. The second Callum disappeared, she debated making a run for it, but that would only make her look all the more guilty.

Think, Thea...

She couldn’t just stand there. Her heart was thumping like mad, and her old injury was starting to ache from all the pressure in her head. She needed to get out of here. Zared was waiting on her...

“Who are you?” A sweet voice, soft and light, caught Thea’s ear. She turned toward the sound, her eyes growing wide as she looked upon the

beautiful face of a blonde-haired young woman with glowing pink eyes. She wore a long black dress, decorated with light pink flowers that trailed the skirt and a sparkling silver crown twisted around her curls.

Queen Priscilla...

“I... I’m Theabelle.”

The queen smiled at her, her dainty features twisted slightly with a perplexed look as she eyed Thea’s red prison dress before settling her gaze on the rose entangled in her fingers. The queen’s eyes widened, the pink growing brighter as she focused on the enchanted bloom.

“Hello, Theabelle... What do you have there?”

chapter forty-one

Thea's voice caught in her throat, partially from the curse tensing her body from the inside out, and partially because she wasn't sure what reply would be sufficient for a divine queen. The rose heated in her palms, and the queen's thin brows raised. She had some sort of plant-based gift from what Thea knew. Could she sense the magic in the rose?

The heat from the rose climbed up her neck, reddening her cheeks as her heart pounded faster. The curse was infecting her more by the second. She opened her mouth to speak, but the pressure in her body left her throat tight. Her tongue felt like lead. How much longer could she keep standing here?

"You're mortal!" the queen gasped, her bright eyes finally drifting away from the rose to see Thea's panicked expression. "Oh goodness, hold on a moment."

Her eyes beamed with a vibrant pink glow, and she raised a palm directly toward Thea's chest. Thea's heart beat faster. *Was she going to kill me for trespassing? Bind me in vines? Toss me into Tarteron?*

Plants shot out from the granite floor, cracking the stone with ease as they raced up toward Thea's neck. She shut her eyes, wincing as the ticklish vines curled around her throat like a slithering serpent. She prepared for the squeeze, certain the queen was going to strangle her where she stood for trespassing into her domain. But the tension never came... in fact, it lessened.

The tightness in her throat faded with a soothing breath, and even the racing in her heart seemed to slow. Her head felt a little light from the release of pressure, but it was already so much better than feeling like she was about to combust. She opened her eyes, surprised to find that a necklace of what appeared to be black lilies was now intertwined around her neck.

"W-what did you—"

“Those are life lilies,” the queen explained, a relieved smile softening her features. “They’re my own creation. I cultivated them in Underworth’s soil as a method to protect the lifespans of mortals if they cross into our kingdom. I’m glad to see they work. You should be protected from the kingdom’s curse until the lilies wilt and die.”

Thea brushed her finger across one of the velvety black petals, her skin tingling from the magic buried beneath it. “Thank you,” she breathed.

“It’s no problem,” the queen said. “Now, let’s try this again. My name is Priscilla, and you’re Theabelle, correct?”

“You can call me Thea.”

“Thea, then.” Priscilla smiled. “How did you find yourself in Underworth? And that rose... Where did you—”

The door swung open behind Thea, smacking into the wall and causing Thea to nearly jump out of her skin. She turned, her heart racing all over again as she found herself face to face with the red-eyed king of the dead.

“*You...*” King Hayden growled, his voice so much colder than Zared’s. He was tall, with ebony hair and pale skin that never saw any sun other than the hazy light of Underworth. He was younger than Thea imagined; maybe mid-to-late twenties? Which made sense, considering his queen was close to Thea’s age. His eyes flickered between a blood red and a dark burgundy that matched the shade of an aged wine. He was surprisingly attractive compared to the stories she’d heard of the ghastly king of the graveyards, but that didn’t make him any less terrifying in the moment. “You’re the one who bypassed my portal... I knew something was odd when I sensed a mortal step foot through my magic.”

“You came through a portal?” Priscilla asked softly, her tone the complete opposite of her authoritative husband’s.

“Y-yes,” Thea said through a sharp breath. “I’m from Olympia. I just want to get back and see my family...”

Not a lie, but not very convincing, either.

“I see,” Priscilla said.

“I don’t,” King Hayden huffed. “Don’t trust her, Priscilla. She didn’t come through just any Olympian portal; she came from the labyrinth.”

Oh no...

Callum's eyes went wide behind the king, and Thea felt herself shrink back under the blazing red eyes of the divine one. It made sense that his magic could detect who or what passed through his portals, though she hadn't even considered the fact that she would run into him during her escape.

"I..."

"You're a prisoner, aren't you?" King Hayden crossed his arms.

"Well, I was but—"

"Those sent to the labyrinth are beyond mercy, that's why they're sent straight to Tarteron." The king waved his hand, and a small flame sparked beside Thea's shoe. She jumped, but there wasn't room for her to run. The fire was starting to circle around her, preparing to open a hole in the floor that would no doubt, lead straight to Tarteron. "I won't have anyone like that wandering through my kingdom."

"Your Majesty, please!" Thea cried out, her nose already filling with the scent of smoke. "I was sent to the labyrinth, but I committed no crime! I only escaped because the labyrinth's beast set me free!"

"The beast?" Queen Priscilla asked behind her. "You mean the labyrinth's executioner?"

"Yes!"

"It doesn't matter," King Hayden said coldly, speeding up the circling flames until they were only a foot from connecting. "She'll say whatever she can to avoid the pits of Tarteron. I don't negotiate with Olympian scum."

"Please, I'm telling the truth!"

"Hayden." The queen's strong tone rattled Thea. She'd been so soft-spoken before now, but with one lift of her voice, the flames froze, only inches from forming a full circle and completing the portal underneath her feet. "Hold on a moment. I want to hear what she has to say."

The king frowned, but he didn't make any motion to finish the portal, either. "Priscilla, she came from the *labyrinth*. She could be dangerous. I don't want you or anyone else getting hurt."

“She’s a mortal, dear,” Priscilla said with a nod in Thea’s direction. “What could she possibly do to hurt us? You know as well as I that those in Olympia don’t always pass fair judgment. Plus, it makes sense that the labyrinth’s beast would have had to show her the portal. No other prisoner has escaped the labyrinth until now.”

Thea had only just met the queen, but she felt like she could hug her until she squeezed all the magic out of her. It wasn’t often that divine ones took mortals seriously.

“Very well.” The king sighed, and the flames vanished from the floor in a puff of smoke. “I trust your judgment, but I won’t be leaving you alone with her, either.”

“Perfect.” The queen smiled at her husband, and the king’s hard shell seemed to soften. “Let’s all sit down and chat together, then. Do you like tea, Thea?”

“Uh, yes, Your Majesty,” Thea gulped.

“Wonderful,” she said brightly. “Callum, would you kindly brew us a pot?”

“It would be my pleasure, my queen,” Callum said with a clean bow.

Thea’s head was still spinning from her multiple near-death experiences and the distant smell of smoke burning the inside of her nose. She somehow staggered through the castle, being guided by the golden-haired queen while being closely watched by her cautious husband. The queen led them to a parlor with black velvet couches, a glass tea table, and large windows that looked out onto the barren land of Underworth. It was strangely cozy, in a calm and serene type of way.

Thea sat in a tall armchair, and the king and queen seated themselves on a sofa directly across from her. The king wrapped a protective arm around his wife’s shoulder, and the queen merely smiled like she was having tea with an old friend.

“*Meow.*”

A small black cat jumped up into Thea’s lap, causing her to flinch until she realized it wasn’t trying to harm her. “Oh, hello,” Thea said to the odd-looking creature. It was as black as night, but with rather strange-looking paws that only had three toes each.

“See, even Cerpurus likes her.” The queen elbowed her husband. “Sorry for all the commotion earlier, Thea. Why don’t you start from the beginning and tell us why you were in the labyrinth?”

“And don’t leave out any details,” King Hayden added, his brow lifted as he watched the cat snuggle into Thea’s lap.

“Well...” Thea took a deep breath, her hand naturally stroking the cat’s soft fur.

She told them everything. Starting from Ceyden’s obsession with her, ending with the beast’s decision to let her leave. She wasn’t sure how much of her tale they would choose to believe, but it was better to place it all on the table while she was given the chance to be heard. The king and queen listened with rapt attention, even to the point where they all neglected to notice the tea after Callum had so kindly served it. When she was done, she felt the rose pulse in her hands, as if reminding her that her story was true, even when it felt bizarre.

“So that rose is meant to be some sort of key?” Priscilla repeated, her gaze glued to the vibrant rose. “Both to Zared’s curse and the labyrinth itself?”

“If what Ceyden claimed was true, then yes,” Thea said as she twisted the flower in her fingers. “Though to be honest, Zared and I could never decipher it. It always felt like it was trying to tell us something, but we could never figure out what.”

“May I see it?” Priscilla asked, stretching out a delicate hand toward the flower. “I promise to be gentle with it. I just have a few things I want to try.”

Thea looked down at the rose, then back at the queen. She’d given her no reason to distrust her, and if anyone could figure out the mystery of the rose, it would be the divine one of spring. Thea handed her the rose, her fingers growing cold as soon as it left her grip.

“I can’t say I’m surprised that the labyrinth would have such a dark history,” King Hayden said as he leaned back in his seat. “Olympians always make the selfish choice. It’s sick to think that Lord Malik would trap his own child in the maze over some silly curse.”

He gritted his teeth, his arms stiff as he crossed them over his chest. He was cursed, too, from what Thea had heard. His brothers tricked him

into eating a cursed pomegranate that bound his soul to Underworth, hence why he could never leave for more than a short period of time. If anyone would understand the abandonment that Zared was going through, it was him.

“I only want to help Zared,” Thea said. “He’s lived in solitude long enough. He shouldn’t be forced to hide away while his family lives like kings above the surface.”

“I agree,” the king said, shocking Thea by how quickly he turned to her side. He looked over at his wife, but she was too entranced by the rose to join the conversation. “If there’s a way to help, you have my support. As for the labyrinth itself, I can’t intervene. That prison is under my brother’s domain, so I can’t have any hand in unraveling it, but freeing your friend shouldn’t cross any lines.”

“Thank you.” Thea smiled. “I know there’s a good chance I’ll be sent back into the labyrinth if I’m spotted in Olympia, but I’ve had my time in the sun. It’s Zared’s turn.”

“That’s rather noble of you,” the king said.

“I prefer to think it’s rather human of me.” Thea shrugged. “I just wish all divine ones could think the same way.”

“As do I...” The king sighed. Perhaps he wasn’t so scary after all...

“Hayden?” Priscilla looked up from the flower, her face frighteningly pale as she turned to her husband. “Do you feel what I feel?”

She passed the flower to Hayden, and he furrowed his brow as his eyes turned the slightest shade of red.

“What’s wrong?” Thea asked, her stomach knotting as the king’s expression darkened.

“You said this rose came from Lord Malik, right?” Priscilla asked, her gaze still trained on the bloom. “And that it seemed like it was alive?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Thea shifted forward, a sick sensation settling over her as she watched the king’s eyes widen.

“It *is* alive,” he said in a ghastly tone.

“But not like a flower would be,” Priscilla explained, her ashen face turning to Thea. She looked like she was going to be sick.

What does she mean, not like a flower?

“Like a soul...” Hayden breathed, and Thea felt an icy shiver crawl down her spine. “This flower used to be a person.”

chapter forty-two

“What?” Thea gasped. “What do you mean, it’s a person?”

“I’ve felt the energy of hundreds of flowers and plants over my life,” Priscilla explained. “This has the energy of a plant, but also something so much more powerful. I can’t explain it; other than the rose is housing something stronger, something with thoughts.”

“A soul,” Hayden clarified, his grip tightening around the rose. “I’m certain of it. I’ve transported enough bodies to know what it feels like when something alive passes through one of my portals, hence why I was able to notice your entrance.” Hayden nodded toward Thea. “This isn’t just some enchanted flower, it’s a trapped soul.”

A trapped soul?

Thea pressed a hand to her lips, her heart pounding as she remembered all the times the rose had responded to her, or pulsed like it had a heartbeat. It had been alive all along...

“But how...? How does a soul become trapped in a flower?” Thea asked.

“I’d gamble it’s trapped in more than just the rose,” Priscilla explained as her fingers twisted into her skirt. “The labyrinth is said to be alive, right? It’s always changing and learning, hence why it’s impossible to navigate.”

Thea’s breath caught. *Of course...*

“The labyrinth and the rose have always been connected,” Thea thought aloud. “They would always work together to guide me, and both had the same strange sentience. Does that mean the soul is split in two places?”

“Or it has two forms,” King Hayden explained as he passed the rose back to his wife. Priscilla took it gingerly, cradling it like a child instead of a plant. “A lock and a key. If the rose is meant to be the key to the

labyrinth's undoing, then the solution might be to combine the two to make the soul whole again. Or at least, that's my first theory. There's still the beast's curse to consider... How does the rose play into this?"

"I'm not sure." Thea shrugged, still wrapping her mind around how a person could be transformed into both a maze and a rose. "Zared was told by his mother that the rose would be the key to curing his curse, and the rose was guarded by Lord Malik, Zared's father. Perhaps Zared's curse is tied to whatever magic is in the rose?"

"Another curse..." King Hayden's eyes flared red, his jaw clenching as something clicked in the back of his festering mind. "Fairmyth... it can't be."

King Hayden rose from his seat, storming out of the room with heavy steps.

"Hayden?" Priscilla got up to follow him, and Thea did the same, earning a grouchy *meow* from Cerpurrus as she knocked him off her lap.

They both tailed the king, following him all the way into a library that was filled with even more books than the parlor they'd been in. The king started raiding the shelves, pulling off old books and scanning the covers before tossing them aside to grab the next.

"Hayden, what are you looking for?" Priscilla asked.

"Something never sat right with me about that Malik fellow," Hayden said as he pulled out another book, this time keeping it and moving toward a table. "His records never added up."

"Records?" Thea asked.

"We keep records of every body buried in Underworth, except for those in Tarteron," Hayden explained as he thumbed through the pages, scanning what looked to be thousands of names. "For divine ones, we also record every birth—that way they can have both dates recorded on their grave when buried. Even mortal children of divine ones are included, such as the prince of Oceanic. So long as they had a divine parent, their birth and death will be recorded."

Priscilla moved beside Hayden, staring over his shoulder at the list of names. "I don't understand," she said. "What does having a birthdate have to do with any of this?"

“It’s not the birthdate,” Hayden said as he stopped on a page, gliding his finger down the list of names. “It’s the death date. Lord Malik reported his eldest son as dead not long before his second birthday, but we never received any body.”

His finger stopped on the page, and Thea raced over to see what he had pointed at.

Zared Ashoran (Mortal)

Thea’s heart pounded when she saw his name. It was almost relieving to know that he had been remembered at one point, but so much sadder when she saw the rest of the report. Underneath his name was a date of birth and a date of death that never truly occurred. Anger swirled up inside Thea as she imagined Lord Malik casually reporting his little son as dead, despite knowing perfectly well he still lived. Just below the death date was a spot for the grave marker to be listed for Zared, but it was left blank.

“So, he was never buried?” Thea asked as she looked back up at the king. “That’s not surprising, considering I know he’s still alive.”

“I agree,” King Hayden said, his voice shockingly grim as he continued to stare at the faded ink. “It’s not uncommon for divine ones to have private burial grounds, especially for their children, so I didn’t think much of it at the time...”

He flipped back a page, revealing a whole other list of names, placing his finger at the bottom of the page. Thea read through the names, trying to figure out what he was trying to show her until one last name caught her eye.

Ashoran

“The strange part, was that wasn’t the first body Malik had kept to himself,” King Hayden brushed his finger across the death date of a lifespan that only appeared to be seven years.

Thea clasped a hand to her mouth, her voice clogged in her throat as she pieced together what the king was implying. The last name on that page had a birth date, death date, and no assigned grave.

Daida Ashoran (Rose Nymph)

“Fairmyth...” Queen Priscilla gasped, her hands shaking around the glowing rose.

“It would seem Zared wasn’t the only child Malik had cursed,”
Hayden growled. “He had a daughter, too.”

chapter forty-three

There were no words to fill the awful silence that permeated the library. At some point, everyone sank into their seats, the queen still looking broken-heartedly at the rose while the king dug deeper and deeper into his records. Thea went completely numb, everything frozen from the shock of Lord Malik's twisted secrets.

"The labyrinth is Lord Malik's daughter..." Thea whispered, the truth feeling even more disgusting when it was spoken out loud.

Hayden and Priscilla looked up, both of their expressions riddled with the same pain Thea felt. None of them knew how to process what they'd learned, not when it was so horrible to think about.

"It all makes sense now," Hayden said as he steeped his fingers on the desk, pressing his fingers against his chin. "Malik was never a very powerful divine one. His gift could transform ordinary objects into complex puzzles, but other than that, he didn't have much use. He must have decided to test his gift on something other than an inanimate object."

"His daughter..." Priscilla swallowed hard. "She was a garden nymph. Her magic would have only fueled his own power, which, in turn, created the most complex maze known to Fairmyth. The labyrinth is alive because she lives in it." She brushed the petals, and they glowed softly in response.

"That explains why there are roses in the labyrinth," Thea said. "Dozens of bushes grow in the dark tunnels. It must be a marker of sorts from Daida."

Daida... It felt so strange to put a name to the maze, but at the same time it felt important to use it. Daida shouldn't be forgotten.

"And it explains why the key to it all took the form of a rose," Priscilla added. "You said Lord Malik kept it hidden, right? He must have feared that destroying it might end his daughter's life and subsequently destroy the labyrinth."

“Well, that fear surely disappeared when he discovered I’d brought the rose into the maze with me,” Thea huffed. “He was more concerned about keeping me inside than what destroying the rose could do to the labyrinth.”

King Hayden straightened. “Hold on, that’s a good point. Malik was determined to keep the rose separated from the labyrinth. Which implies that putting them together could be the key to undoing Daida’s curse.”

“But I tried that, already,” Thea said. “I had the rose inside the labyrinth for weeks and nothing happened.”

“Then there must be something more to it,” Priscilla said. “Something that only Lord Malik knows.”

The notes in his study...

“I think you’re right,” Thea said as she rose to her feet. “When I worked in Lord Malik’s house, I came across a document of sorts titled *The Rose and the Labyrinth*. I had planned to look for it if I made my way back to Olympia.”

“Where was this document?” Hayden asked, rising from the desk to join her.

“In his study, hidden on the back of a shelf.”

“That certainly sounds promising!” Priscilla said as she jumped up alongside Hayden. “Maybe it will tell you how to break Daida’s curse and free her from the labyrinth.”

“Free her?” Thea looked down at the flower, her heart pulsing in sync with the rose’s glow. “Do you really think she can be saved? I mean... could she be returned to normal?”

“I don’t see why not,” Priscilla said as she placed the rose back in Thea’s hand, allowing her to feel the warmth of her living soul. “She’s definitely still alive. She’s just trapped between the flower and the labyrinth walls. Breaking the curse that binds her may very well return her to her original form.”

Her original form... Could she really turn the labyrinth back into a girl?

“But wait. What about Zared?” Thea asked, thinking back to his soft gaze and tender touch. “I thought the rose was meant to be a cure for *him*,

not the labyrinth. What will happen if the maze is undone, and he's still inside?"

Thea bit her lip. She had learned so much, but none of it explained why Zared was a beast. She wanted to help his sister, but where would Zared go if the maze simply vanished?

"You said his mother told him the rose was the key, correct?" Priscilla asked, her soft smile easing Thea's tormenting thoughts.

"Well, yes."

"Perhaps his mother knew what truly happened to Daida. Or at least, found out later," Priscilla said. "Maybe she believes Daida has the answer."

Could that be true?

Thea looked down at the rose, wishing she could ask Daida herself if she knew what to do. She wanted to help them both, but for now, she just had to take it one step at a time. At least this way, she could go back to see Zared. Once she learned how to break Daida's curse, she could visit Zared again, knowing she had a way out of the labyrinth.

"I can send you straight into Lord Malik's study," Hayden said, already raising his hand to create a portal. "But after that, I'm afraid I can't get any more involved. If Zion ever suspected me of destroying his perfect maze—"

"He'll never know you were involved," Thea promised. "Thank you both so much for everything. I promise not to say anything that will endanger you or Underworth."

"Thank you, Thea." Priscilla smiled. "I hope you're able to help Zared. I can tell he's quite special to you."

Thea's cheeks flared. "S-special? I mean, he did save me a few times, and he's been great to talk to, and um..."

He is special... but why is so hard to admit that? Is it because I'm afraid that he's more than just special to me?

"He sounds wonderful." Priscilla laughed. "I hope we can meet him someday."

"I hope you can too." Thea smiled, pressing the rose against her chest. "Perhaps next time I visit you'll be able to meet Daida more officially,

too.”

At least I hope so.

“Are you ready?” Hayden asked, the portal already starting to form its ring of fire.

“Yes,” Thea said, grabbing the bag she had entered Underworth with and tightening her grip on the rose. “I’m ready.”

Hayden nodded, then hastened the connection of the flames. Once the circle was formed, smoke filled the center of the ring, then cleared away to reveal a study Thea never expected to see again, though it looked different than it had before.

The desk was smashed to pieces and swept up in a corner, along with dozens of other broken trinkets and tools. The shelves seemed broken, too, but most of the papers seemed to be stacked in cluttered piles around the room.

“Tidy guy,” Hayden huffed. “You can step through whenever you’re ready. Best of luck, Thea.”

“Thank you.” Thea nodded, then turned to the portal putting one foot through, then the other. The warm ring of fire heated the air around her until she stepped through to the other side and felt the first beam of sunshine she’d felt in weeks.

The portal closed behind her, leaving only the scent of smoke in the air behind. She stared out the window, eyes wide as she looked out on the kingdom she thought she would never see again, except from below.

She had finally done it...

She’d escaped the labyrinth.

chapter forty-four

I made it.

Thea took a long breath, assuring herself that this was no dream and she truly had returned home. So many emotions crashed down on her; she wanted to laugh, cry, and even scream as she relived the last moments she had spent in this household. Everything started in this house, and now this is where she would figure out how to end it.

She tucked the rose delicately into her bag, careful not to crush any of the petals or the stem. She couldn't look at the rose the same way now that she knew what it truly was. She worried that crushing the rose at all would hurt Daida or, at the very least, cause her distress.

"Don't worry," she whispered to the flower before tucking it away, "I'm going to find the answers we need." The rose glowed at her once before she slung the bag back over her shoulder, assuring Thea her efforts were appreciated.

She went to work hunting for the documents. The study was completely turned upside down compared to the last time she'd been in to clean it. The shelves were half broken, with the contents spilled on the floor, and there were various piles of papers, writing tools, and books scattered across the ground. Thea started digging through the first pile, hunting for anything that looked useful. She'd only seen the document for a brief moment before, but it was enough to remember that the paper had been old and yellowed.

She sifted through the piles one at a time, scanning the contents for anything that looked to be well worn. She found old diagrams for the labyrinth gates, and even the original blueprints for the Ashoran estate, but the papers on the rose were nowhere to be found.

Think, Thea...

She went back to the shelf she had first found the papers on and started shoving away the clutter. She brushed her hand along the back of the shelf, feeling the slightest movement, like something was pressed flat against the shelf's wall. She dug her nails under it, peeling away the paper that had been hidden in plain sight.

Yes!

There was more than one. She tugged the papers free and spread them out across the floor in full view. They were the same yellowed color she had remembered, with sketches of twisted tunnels and passages that all appeared to make up the labyrinth. Her heart leaped as she read the scribbled note at the top of one of the pages.

The Rose and the Labyrinth.

"We found it, Daida." Thea smiled to herself.

She scanned over the documents, looking for any sort of instructions, or history that would explain how the rose and the maze went together. All she could see were maps, but none of them truly fit together. Each map of the maze looked completely different from the other, with twisting tunnels that had no rhyme or reason.

"Come on... There has to be something." Thea turned the papers over, looking at them from every angle possible until a soft warmth distracted her from inside her bag.

She looked inside, seeing that the rose was practically flashing with its glowing magic, trying to get her attention. Thea pulled out the rose and held it over the papers, as if trying to let Daida join in on the search. Once she held the flower above the tangle of maze tunnels, something finally stood out to her.

"Hold on..." Thea shifted the papers back in order, then held the rose above them like a centerpiece. When looking down at the sketches of the tunnels, it almost looked like the rose had... "Roots!" Thea exclaimed. "It looks like a root system!"

The rose beamed at her, flaring with warmth and its enchanting glow like its own version of a smile. Thea placed the rose on top of the papers, trying to figure out how this all went together. Priscilla and Hayden had mentioned that the rose likely needed to be reunited with the maze to

become whole again. Does that mean that Lord Malik cut the rose off from the roots?

“So how do I reattach it?” Thea thought out loud. “The roses in the labyrinth... they started to wilt when I brought Daida’s rose into the tunnels. Of course... the labyrinth was trying to show us that a new rose needed to be planted, once that could truly connect to the roots. Oh, Daida, that must be it! You need to be planted in the labyrinth!”

Thea hugged the bloom, her heart pulsing with the warm flares of the flower. It was all coming together. If Thea was correct, then Daida would be free soon, and Zared...

I can only hope Daida knows how to save him next.

Thea stood from the floor, prepping to make her way straight back into the labyrinth, despite barely having set foot in the sun. Zared was waiting for her, and she didn’t want to leave him guessing any longer than he already had been.

She turned to leave, but froze when she saw a familiar figure standing in the doorway, his face ashen with shock as his lips parted. She had been so distracted that she never heard the door open, or anyone step inside.

“Thea...?” Ceyden gaped at her, his eyes glowing from his divine gift. He must have used his power to find her the moment she set foot in Olympia. “It’s you... It’s really you!”

He ran straight for her, wrapping her in his arms so tight, Thea was afraid he would crush Daida’s flower. Hearing him tensed something deep inside Thea. She forgot how much he sounded like Zared.

“I can’t believe it!” he said, pulling back to get a good look at Thea. “You made it out! I was starting to think that you had perished and that the rose was utter garbage.”

“Hello, Ceyden,” Thea said with a dry swallow. “Yes, I made it out, but I’m afraid I can’t stay right now.”

“Can’t stay?” Ceyden laughed. “Don’t be silly. It’s been months since you left. The least you can spare me is a few minutes.”

“Months?” Thea’s eyes went wide. *How long have I been gone?*

“Yes, didn’t you see that winter is nearly over?” Ceyden pointed toward the window. “But it doesn’t matter. You’re finally back. Oh,

Theabelle, I never stopped thinking about you. Have you seen your family yet? They're doing quite well now, just like I promised. You'll be quite pleased with how I held up my end of the deal."

The deal? Oh no...

"Right," Thea said. "About that deal... Ceyden I need to—"

"We'll likely have to elope before my father finds out you escaped," Ceyden continued. "He wasn't happy to hear that I gave you the rose. Why don't we do it today? I can hardly wait to have you in my arms now that you're finally back where you belong."

Back where I belong...

"Ceyden, I'm going back into the labyrinth," Thea said boldly, pulling away from his embrace.

Ceyden stared at her, his dumb smile still plastered on his face. "W-what? Don't be silly, Thea. You're safe now. You never have to go back in there again. I'll make sure of it."

"I know I don't have to, but I need to," Thea said. "There's someone in there who needs my help, and I can't abandon him now."

"*Him?*" Ceyden's tone shifted, her brows furrowing as a dark cloud passed over the window. "Who could you possibly know that is in the labyrinth? Everyone down there is a criminal or a murderer. They're the scum of Olympia."

"I was down there," Thea reminded him.

"Yes, but that's different." Ceyden rolled his eyes. "I don't care who's down there. You're not going back. You're lucky enough the beast didn't rip you to bits the first time; I'm not risking you stepping foot in there again."

"The beast is the *reason* I need to go back," Thea said, her heart flaring as she thought back to Zared's heartbroken gaze. "Ceyden, there's no easy way to tell you this, but the beast... his name is Zared, and he's your brother."

Ceyden didn't say anything at first, his eyes narrowed as he tried to determine whether or not Thea actually knew what words were coming out of her mouth. A second later, he burst out into full-blown laughter.

“Thea, do you hear yourself? The *beast* is my brother?” Ceyden wheezed. “You must have been isolated for too long. Come on, let’s get you some water and then we’ll—”

“Ceyden, this isn’t a joke!” Thea pulled away from him, stopping his laughter and earning another of his possessive glares. “I know I made a deal with you, but it’s going to have to wait until I save Zared. I promised him I—”

“You *promised* him?” Ceyden’s voice raised. “No, no, no, you promised *me* that we would wed if you made it out alive. I don’t care what kind of promised you made with your imaginary friends in the tunnels. Beast or not, you’re staying with me now, Thea. *That’s* what you promised.” He grabbed her by the arm, his grip as tight as an iron shackle as he dragged her out of the study.

“Ceyden, wait! Let me go!”

“Quiet! My father will be home any minute. We need to get someone to officiate our wedding before he returns. He won’t dare send my bride back into the tunnels,” Ceyden said as he dragged her through the halls.

“Ceyden, please! Your brother needs help! I know you never met him, but—”

“Enough!” Ceyden jerked Thea to his side as he threw open a storage room door with his free hand. He tossed Thea into the room, causing her to stumble to her knees and nearly collide with a collection of brooms. “No more nonsense about brothers, or beasts, or the labyrinth. You’re going to stay here until I get everything sorted, then we’ll get you some help, Thea. Your mind is sick from the tunnels, but don’t worry, I’ll help you. I’ll always be by your side soon.”

He started to shut the door, and Thea clambered to her feet to try stop him, but she was too slow.

“No!”

The door slammed shut, and once again, Thea was a prisoner.

chapter forty-five

Zared scraped his claw against the cave wall, adding to the markings he'd been leaving every day since Thea had left. Another week had passed. He knew he'd promised Thea he'd wait for her, but how many months did he have to endure before he finally accepted what he'd feared all along?

She's gone...

He paused his claw after scratching only half of the tally mark into the stone. There was no point in keeping track of the days now. Even if Underworth had morphed her flow of time, there was no guarantee that she managed to escape. He thought back to the last moment he saw her, and the soft pressure of her lips against his forehead.

He'd been a fool to care for her... Not because she was someone who didn't deserve to be cared for, but because he was someone she could never return to. Even if she did make it back to Olympia, she had his handsome younger brother waiting to sweep her off her feet. She said she didn't want to marry him, but Thea wasn't the type to go back on her promises, either...

Just like she promised to come back for me...

Zared sank against the wall that was lined with tally marks, putting his back toward the endless list of days he'd been stuck thinking about the girl he could never have. He'd always hated being a beast, but even more so, he hated being abandoned as a child. He always thought he deserved to be abandoned because of how he looked, but Thea never made him feel that way at all... Perhaps that's why it hurt so much when she abandoned him, too. She left him because she cared for him, which meant it was just *him* who deserved to be left alone.

That's a curse that cannot be cured.

.....

“Let me out!” Thea kicked at the door while trying to wiggle the narrow end of a broomstick in between the lock and the hinge. “Ceyden! You can’t just cage me!”

She kicked harder, causing a few splinters to fly off from the wood. If she had to chip away at the door piece by piece, then she would. She refused to let Ceyden drag her to the altar when she still hadn’t saved his brother. Thea backed up against the far wall, preparing to run at the door with all her strength, when all of the sudden, a *click* sounded in the lock.

Ceyden?

Thea froze mid dash, holding the broom in a defensive position in case she needed to fight her way past the divine brat. The door swung open, and Thea raised the broomstick to smash it over Ceyden’s big head, but stopped in her tracks when she saw that it wasn’t Ceyden, but one of the older maids who worked for Lord Malik.

“Oh!” the poor woman gasped, clutching the key to her heart as she laid eyes on Thea’s halted attack. “My goodness. Theabelle, dear? Is that you?”

“Marlie!” Thea dropped the broom, grabbed the rose, and rushed into the older woman’s arms. “Oh, you have no idea how happy I am to see you! But I’m afraid I can’t talk now. Thank you!”

Thea raced past the bewildered old woman like a caged dog that had been sprung free. She dashed through the manor’s halls, looking for the quickest way out so she could make a run for the labyrinth. Ceyden could still be close by, and there was no telling where he’d lock her up next if he saw her again. She darted down the main staircases, deciding to sneak out through the servants’ passage behind the kitchen. Thea’s feet hit the bottom of the steps, and she turned for the kitchen just in time for her to stop cold in her tracks.

The blood drained from Thea’s face as she met an equally stunned pair of eyes. They were glowing, yet somehow still so dark compared to the gazes of either of his sons. Lord Malik stood directly between Thea and her escape; his focus trained on the beaming rose cradled in her grip.

“You...” Lord Malik’s voice dripped with venom, his power simmering in the air as clicking and locking sounds echoed around her. “You’re supposed to be *dead*.”

Thea staggered back a step, her heart pounding as she heard another sound of a lock. She looked at the nearest window, and her stomach plummeted as Lord Malik's magic transformed it into a crystal barred cage.

"I have no business with you," Thea said as bravely as she could, darting her gaze around for another place to escape.

The servants' passage. Lord Malik probably wouldn't think of locking a door he never uses. I can still get out that way if I can get past him.

"That's too bad," Lord Malik said, waving his hand to gather a few of his servants to his side. "Because you, dear, affect all my business. You entered my labyrinth, which means you are no longer permitted to exist." He snapped his fingers, and the sound of a massive lock turning echoed throughout the halls of the mansion. "Get her."

The servants looked about as panicked as Thea felt, but the terrifying aura that Lord Malik was projecting was enough to make anyone obey. Footmen and stewards came at her from all angles, but Thea wasn't about to let herself get caught again. She dashed between the servants, grateful for all her practice escaping being murdered in the tunnels of the labyrinth. She ran straight toward Malik, preparing to push past him and hunt for an escape in the servants' hall.

Lord Malik's eyes went wide as she tried to duck around him. He caught her by the arm, but she was ready to fight back. She stamped down hard on his foot, causing him to yowl as she pulled free. She made a dash for the servants' exit, racing inside the concealed door and sprinting down the hall. Lord Malik must have figured out her plan, because the hall was getting tighter the farther she ran down it. In fact, it was shrinking faster than she could run.

"Come on!" Thea raced the divine one's magic, ducking lower and lower until she was making a mad crawl for the exit. It felt like she was being encased in a coffin, but just before the walls could crush her bones, she burst through the tiny remnants of the door and rolled out onto the manor's grass.

She laid in the soft greenery for a moment to catch her breath, then darted back to her feet. There was no time to waste. She needed to get back into the labyrinth before another Ashoran stopped her.

“Show me the safest route to the labyrinth,” Thea begged the ring, her hand warming upon her request. She let the magic guide her around to the back gate, then through the small patch of forest on Lord Malik’s property. Even the safest route still risked danger, so she didn’t waste any time moving forward.

Thea stayed on the edges of the path, keeping her face out of sight anytime someone passed her by. The red dress she’d been given to wear in the labyrinth caused a few folks to turn their heads, but she didn’t wait around for them to ask questions. By the time she made it to the center of town, her lungs were begging for air.

She paused to catch her breath, holding the rose tight as she took in the clean air of her old home before leaving it once again.

“T-Thea?”

That voice...

Thea sat up, sweat running across her brow as she met the misty eyes of her younger sister. “D-Dora...” she gasped.

She almost didn’t recognize her. Her usually uncombed hair was freshly washed and combed into a long braid. Her tattered dress had been replaced with a yellow cotton one that actually fit her properly, and in her arms was a basket full of bread and apples that she appeared to be bringing back with her.

“I-is that... A-are you...?” Tears spilled from her big eyes, and she dropped the basket, letting the apples roll across the ground. “Oh Theabelle!” She threw herself into Thea’s arms, sobbing like she was still a child as Thea gripped her sister tightly.

“Shh, it’s all right, Dora. It’s really me,” Thea soothed. “But you need to keep your voice down. I’m not supposed to be out of the labyrinth.”

Dora pulled back, her eyes still streaming tears as she took a good look at her older sister. “I-I’m sorry, but how? How are you alive? How are you here? The maze... and the beast—”

“I promise to explain it all soon,” Thea said softly as she wiped another tear from her sister’s cheek. “But for now, there’s something I still need to do. Please tell the others that I love them, and even if I don’t see them again, I’m really happy where I’m at.”

“W-what?” Dora blinked. “What do you mean, if you don’t see them again? You’re free now, aren’t you?”

“I have to go, Dora.” Thea pecked a kiss on her sister’s forehead, leaving her half-crumpled on the ground as she ran past her. “There’s a beast that needs my help.”

“A b-beast?” Dora gaped. “Thea, wait! What are you—”

Her voice vanished behind her as Thea followed the ring’s guidance back to the labyrinth gates. It tore her heart in two to leave Dora and her family behind, but there was someone else who was still waiting on her, someone she had promised to return to.

“It’s been months since you left...”

She thought back to what Ceyden had told her. Winter was over, and the first song of spring was lilting through the air. Underworth had warped her time more than she realized, and now she could only hope that Zared hadn’t given up on her. A tingle swept over her lips as she recalled the moment she kissed him goodbye. Her cheeks flushed at the memory. It hadn’t been too much, had it? Or had it not been enough?

When she finally stumbled across the labyrinth gates, a familiar sick feeling twisted in her gut. The last time she had been here, she was essentially preparing for her execution. There was no one around the gate this time, but so much still felt the same. Her blood red dress still marked her as a criminal, and the rose was still by her side. Never in her life did she expect to enter the labyrinth twice, but then again, never had she expected to escape it once.

Second time’s the charm, I hope.

She pulled the gate open, her shoulders burning from the strength it took to creak the iron bars apart just enough so she could fit inside. She looked down at the dark tunnel, recalling the terrifying descent into the pitch black she had done once before. With a steady breath, she held the rose out, allowing its soft glow to light her path.

“Take me to the beast,” she said to the ring, her heart glowing with the flower as she imagined seeing him again. The ring obeyed, gladly confirming that was what her heart wanted most in that moment. She prepared to take her first step down, returning to the cursed tunnels to hopefully save not just Zared, but discover how she really felt about him.

She knew she cared for him, but was that really all? She'd know when she saw him, but in truth, she felt that she already knew now...

I'm coming, Zared, just hold—

“Get back here!” A strong hand snatched Thea by the shoulder, the nails digging into her skin as they nearly yanked her out of the gates. “Where do you think you’re going with *that*.”

Thea whirled around, jerking her hand out of reach right before Lord Malik snatched the rose from her grasp. He must have known she was coming back here and took a quicker route.

“Let me go!” Thea tried to pull away, but the divine one kept a fierce grip on her arm, piercing his skin with his clawed grip.

“Oh, you can go!” he said with a twisted smile and a crazed look flashing in his eyes. “Just give me the rose first! I can’t let you take it inside!”

He pulled Thea closer, smacking her side into the cold iron bars with a *clank*. He made another grab for the rose, but Thea held it as far back as he could. He didn’t seem willing to actually step through the gates himself, so as long as she stayed inside, the rose would be safe.

“Release me!” Thea shouted, trying to gain the attention of anyone she could. “I thought you didn’t want anyone to see I had escaped!”

“Shut up!” He pulled her arm again, this time causing her head to smack into the bars with a dizzying echo. “Give me the rose, and you can go run back to that putrid beast for all I care! That flower cannot be taken inside!”

He looked mad. His magic sparked wildly around him as rocks transformed into odd puzzle boxes, or keys, and the ground churned underneath him.

“Why?” Thea asked, meeting him square in the eye as she stopped resisting for a moment. “Because you don’t want Daida to be set free?”

He froze. The name Daida rattled him, causing his magic to fizzle as he blinked through the shock. How long had it been since he’d heard his own daughter’s name? Thea didn’t wait to ask. She took advantage of his stunned state and jerked her arm free, dashing down the black tunnel without a moment of hesitation.

Her heart hammered in her chest, and both the ring and the rose pulsed with energy as she descended deeper into the darkness.

He's lost his mind... He was truly willing to do anything to protect his reputation, even sacrifice two of his children.

She shook the sickening image from her thoughts. It didn't matter now; she was in the tunnel, and he was stuck above ground. He wouldn't bother her anymore... At least, she thought so...

The gates creaked in the distance.

chapter forty-six

Two more prisoners have entered the labyrinth.

Zared watched the maze flicker, informing him of the new arrivals now that he didn't have his ring to direct him to them. He sighed, picking up his axe to go deal with the newcomers while he still had the motivation to stand. He placed his hand on the axe's handle, but for some reason, couldn't convince himself to pick it up.

Do I really need to defend myself?

He left the axe, wandering out into the tunnels with only his claws as protection. Maybe it was because he was mad, or maybe because he was hopeful, but Zared didn't want to be an executioner today. He didn't want to be seen as a beast.

He wandered through the tunnels, each step feeling heavier than the last as he only half-heartedly followed the labyrinth's guidance. It was harder to locate prisoners in the tunnels without his ring, but he didn't regret giving it up. Each time he looked down at his bare finger, he imagined the gold ring wrapped around Thea's delicate thumb. Whether she was alive or dead, she still carried a part of him with her; he just wished he could have held on to something of hers...

His heart ached as he continued onward, longing for her tender touch and vibrant company. Some days, he wondered if he made the right choice when he let her go, but the longer he dwelled on it, the more he didn't regret it. He couldn't keep her a prisoner here, no matter how badly he wanted her to stay. He supposed it was true that you never realized how much you loved something until you let it go...

Footsteps echoed down the tunnel, alerting Zared that he had found one of the prisoners. He paused to listen, ensuring he only heard one set of feet that was moving quickly. He took a deep breath, preparing himself to face a criminal without the threat of his blade. It had been so long since he'd talked to someone.

Maybe they won't fear me if I show no threat.

The footsteps halted with the intruder's face still shadowed by the tunnels. They must have seen Zared, and were deciding what to make of the horrific beast in front of them. Zared made no advances, waiting for the faceless figure to either step into the light or dash back the way they'd come.

"Fairmyth..." The voice was deep and coarse, almost reminiscent of Zared's voice, but without the growl. "You're still just as disgusting as you were back then."

Back then?

The figure stepped into the light, revealing a middle-aged man with clean kept clothes, graying hair, and dark eyes that looked painfully familiar... They looked like *his* eyes; the one part of himself that still looked human.

"Who... who are you?" Zared asked, his heart suddenly racing like he should be the one to run in fear.

"Oh please, don't tell me you don't recognize your own creator," the man scoffed, his mouth curling into a self-important grin.

Creator...?

Zared's heart stopped, dropping all the way down to his hooves as he recognized the man he had never realized he remembered. Those eyes... that face... the last time he saw them, they had been locking him behind a pair of iron gates as a mere toddler...

"Malik..." Zared breathed.

"Oh, come now, why not call me 'father?'" He chuckled, holding out his arms as if he expected some sort of warm reunion.

"You're no father to me," Zared growled, reaching for his axe, only to remember it wasn't there. "You're a monster."

"No, my boy, I'm afraid there's only one monster down here," Malik scoffed, looking up and down Zared's cursed form. "There's no need to be so frosty. I saved you from a lifetime of humiliation and ridicule. Down here you have a purpose, and the freedom to show your face to whoever you please in the home I built for you."

“You threw me away.” Zared clenched his fists to his sides, his entire body beginning to shake. *Does he really think he can convince me that he did me a favor by tossing me aside?*

“I sheltered you from an unforgiving world,” Malik said stiffly. “Don’t act so *ungrateful*. This labyrinth is your home, and now you must help me protect it. There’s a girl down here with a wicked rose that needs to be destroyed. Find her and bring the rose to me, or else you’ll—”

“Thea?” Zared’s anger melted, his heart lifting as his eyes went wide. “She’s here? She really came back?”

Malik narrowed his eyes, his gaze glowing and shifting like cogs in a machine. “You know the girl...?”

“Better than I know *you*,” Zared growled. “Where is she? I need to find her.”

“Why? So she can laugh while she destroys your home?”

Zared paused, his blood starting to bubble as his temper rose. “What are you talking about?”

“The rose, you fool!” Malik hissed. “She wants to use it to destroy my labyrinth!”

“No, the rose is meant to cure my curse,” Zared said. “I know it is. Mother left me a note saying—”

“That ridiculous woman,” Malik said sharply. “She knew hardly anything about my work. Your curse was never meant to be broken, my boy. That’s why I had to put you down here! But if the labyrinth is destroyed, where will you have left to go? Those in Olympia will never accept you.”

What is he talking about? Mother said the rose was the answer.

“You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Malik crossed his arms. “Would you really trust an old note over your father who *built* this maze?”

Zared’s blood ran hot, his head racing as the conflicting statements waged war in his mind. He’d never considered that his mother’s information could be wrong, yet he also had no reason to trust that his father was telling the truth...

“I trust Thea,” Zared said with a lift of his chin. “If she’s come back with the rose, then it can only be to help me. She would never try to hurt me.”

She promised to save me, and I believe in that promise.

“The criminal!?” Malik laughed. “She’s a common crook! Why would you be so foolish as to trust her? All she wants is the glory of taking down everything I’ve ever built!”

“You don’t know her, then.”

“I know she tried to kill me!” Malik continued, his face flushed with rage. “She’s always been envious of my household, and now she wants to destroy my maze, and you, my eldest son! She’s come to destroy all of us, Zared!”

Zared flinched at the sound of his own name. It sounded so different coming from his father’s mouth. He hated hearing it.

“Like I said, you don’t know Theabelle,” Zared said sternly, sizing up to his father until his shadow swallowed him. “She’s kind, resourceful, and not the crook you believe her to be. She cared for me in these tunnels, just as I cared for her. Whatever she plans to do, I will trust her.”

“Cared for you!?” Malik burst out into laughter, his eyes wild as he taunted Zared’s confidence. “Don’t be ridiculous! Just look at yourself! The girl must have manipulated your mind. Who could ever care for a hideous beast?”

“I don’t care for a beast.”

Zared whirled around, his heart nearly slamming out of his chest as he turned to see the stunning woman who looked exactly as he remembered her the day she left. It was Thea... She came back.

“I care for *Zared*.” Thea stepped forward, the rose beaming in her hand as she met Malik’s eyes. “The only beast I see is *you*.”

chapter forty-seven

“Thea!” Zared rushed to Thea, and she gladly ran into his arms.

He squeezed her so tightly, yet still delicately enough that he didn’t risk harming her. Her heart soared to be with him again, but she’d only missed him for the span of a day. How long had he been waiting to see her again?

“Zared, I’m sorry you had to wait so long,” Thea said with her face half-buried in his fur.

“It’s all right,” Zared whispered in her ear, his warm breath sending a tingle across her skin. “It was worth it. You’re here now. That’s all that matters.”

Thea pulled back a few inches, getting a good look at those eyes that always made time stand still. She felt overjoyed, her entire body buzzing with energy as she finally understood how she truly felt. He’d waited for her... She didn’t want to make him wait a single day more to know how she felt about him.

“Zared, I—” Thea screamed as Lord Malik grabbed her by the hair and pulled her away from Zared’s arms. In a panic, she dropped the rose, grateful it left her grip before Malik could snatch it from her.

“Thea!” Zared reached out to pull Thea back, but stopped before he could make contact.

Something cool and sharp pressed against Thea’s neck, allowing her to understand why Zared hesitated. Malik had pulled a knife from his pocket, and now it was pressed up against the soft part of Thea’s throat.

For the first time, Zared truly looked like an animal. His eyes went bloodshot, and his fangs glistened with a snarl as he met his father’s soulless eyes. “Let her go!”

Thea didn’t move, but she could feel Malik shift behind her, trying to adjust so he could reach for the rose Thea had dropped.

“Zared! Get the rose!” Thea shouted.

Zared reacted quickly, scooping up the flower before Malik could try to swipe it first. Malik swore, his sour breath turning Thea’s stomach as he pressed the blade deeper against her skin. Warm blood trickled out from under the blade, but she could hardly feel the pain with all the adrenaline rushing through her blood.

“Give me the rose, beast!” Malik snapped, not afraid to draw more blood for the sake of putting on a show. “Give it to me now or she dies!”

Thea closed her eyes, clearing her mind and settling her breathing as she tried not to focus on the blade digging into her throat. She could handle this. All Zared had to do to be free was reunite Daida’s broken soul.

“Zared, listen to me,” Thea said calmly, unsure if her peace was coming from her mind or her lack of blood. “I need you to do something with the rose.”

“Be quiet!” Malik tightened his grip on the blade, and another trickle of blood cascaded down her throat.

“Thea!” Zared tried to reach for her, but one look of warning from his father was enough to shackle him in place. The rose was already wilting in his hand, their curses repelling against each other and causing his sister’s energy to fade.

I hope this still works if he does it...

“Zared, I need you to plant the rose.” Thea tried to swallow, but her throat was starting to swell inside.

“What?” Zared looked so lost, his only interest was still in pulling her free from his father’s hands.

“It will set us all free,” Thea said, her vision growing fuzzy as the pain finally bypassed her adrenaline. “The labyrinth is the rose’s roots; put it together and she’ll be made whole.”

“I don’t understand!”

“That’s enough out of you!” Malik pulled the blade back, preparing to plunge it into Thea’s chest.

“Thea!”

“Do it, Zared!” Thea grabbed for Malik’s hand, barely holding him back before he could spear her heart. “Now!”

Zared roared, but to Thea’s relief, he plunged his claws into the dirt, tearing open a hole and sticking the stem inside. The rose was nearly brown, petals drifting off of it as the rose settled into the soil.

It’s still wilting...

“I’m coming!” Thea twisted Malik’s wrist, earning a cry from him and enough of an opening that she could stumble free from his grasp. Her dress was spotted with the fresh crimson, and her eyes were blurred from the pain burning along her throat, but she didn’t care.

She ran for the rose. Zared’s hand was still wrapped around the stem, holding it upright as Thea knelt beside him and scooped the excess soil over the exposed rose end. She gripped the stem with Zared, their eyes locking as warmth flooded their hands. The rose perked up, filling with life and color as it grew brighter and brighter.

“No!” Malik ran for Thea, his dagger held high and ready. Thea covered her head, but Zared let out a deafening roar, that caused Malik to stagger back until the light of the rose was too bright for anyone to see at all.

Everything started shaking; the floors, the walls, and even Zared’s hand quaked beside hers.

“What’s happening?” Zared asked, reaching out for Thea blindly until his hand found her free one. Thea gripped it tightly, keeping her eyes shut as white light enveloped every inch of the cavern.

“You told me not to come back without a way out,” Thea said, having to raise her voice over the sound of the crumbling tunnels. “I think it’s time we both leave.”

chapter forty-eight

“What have you done? We’re all going to die in here!” Malik wailed, his voice nearly lost under the sound of the collapsing tunnels.

Zared pulled Thea to his side, their hands still gripping the rose as the glow encompassed everything in sight. It was hot. The stone felt like it was going to burn through the bottom of Thea’s shoes, and even Zared’s warm embrace felt cool compared to the air around him. She suspected something would happen to the labyrinth after she reconnected Daida’s soul, but she never stopped to consider what would happen to those left inside the labyrinth.

Are we going to be crushed? What about Daida? Where will she reform?

“Thea,” Zared’s voice was dry and gritted, likely from all the dust that was sweeping through the air and clogging their throats. “I need you to know something.”

A deafening crash echoed behind them, but it was too bright to see what had happened. Thea jumped at the sound, and Zared gripped her tighter. Her heart raced as terror threatened to shred her, but it was hard to be afraid when the rose felt so strong in her grasp and Zared held her so closely. She wanted this to save him. She wanted to free him from his torment and bring him toward the life he deserved to live, a life that she could live with him...

I want to share my life with him...

“I have something to tell you, too.” Thea nuzzled deeper into his hold, the sounds fading around them as she focused only on his breathing.

“Thea, I...” He moved his face beside her ear, his fangs brushing the side of her head as he whispered to her in the most tender voice that silenced everything else around her. “I love you, Thea. No matter what happens next, I need you to know that I never stopped longing for you

while you were away. If we die here, I'm glad it's while I got to see you one last time. A lifetime as the labyrinth's beast was worth waiting to meet you."

Thea dug her hand into his fur, her entire body melting into his as her heart beamed brighter than the rose. The crumbling sounds were starting to die off, and the light was fading ever so slowly, but Thea was too enraptured by Zared's words to even notice that the rose had dissolved from their grasp. She reached her free hand for his face as it slowly came back into view, cupping his face as she drew closer, her forehead pressing against his.

"I love you, too, Zared," she whispered, her eyes finally finding his as the rest of the blinding light faded. He still looked like the same beast she had first met in the tunnels, with twisted horns, a round snout, and sharp fangs taking up most of his smile, but Thea never truly saw him as a beast. He was Zared. The man who had the strength to reach out for help when he needed it, and still stand by her side when she needed him.

His eyes brightened almost to a polished silver, and she could feel his hands wrap around her waist. She melted into his touch, but only for a second before she realized that he was holding her with two hands, and the rose was nowhere to be seen. She pulled away a few inches, then glanced around the cave to see that it was completely different than before.

"Sunlight..." Thea said as she turned her head toward the direction of the golden glow. "Zared, look!"

Zared followed her gaze, and they both stopped breathing as they saw the wide mouth of the cave that led to a pair of cracked iron gates. It was the entrance to the labyrinth... but the cave they were in didn't lead down a set of perilous black stairs—it only led to a dead end a few feet behind them.

The labyrinth is gone...

A small crowd of people started to cluster around the gates. They must have been able to feel the same quaking they did or at least hear the gates crack, but no one dared approach the shallow cave.

"Thea..." Zared kept a tight hold on her, his nerves tensing his grip as he looked out onto his first glimpse of the world above. "You did it... You destroyed Malik's labyrinth, but... my curse." He looked down at the claws

he had cautiously wrapped around Thea, and she could practically feel his heart drop. “I can’t go out like this... What will they think?”

Thea took his hand, lacing her fingers between his with a reassuring squeeze. “I learned to love you,” she smiled, “and so will they.”

“Some of us already do.” A new voice interrupted them, causing Thea to jump as she turned around to see an entirely new face step out of the shadows behind her. It was a woman, with long dark hair that stretched past her elbows, a simple rose-pink dress, fair skin, and a familiar pair of gray eyes. Lying behind her in the shadows was Malik, unconscious but still breathing, likely from getting caught up in the collapsing tunnels. “Theabelle, Zared, it’s so great to properly meet you. My name is Daida Ashoran.”

Zared’s jaw dropped, but Thea couldn’t help but break out into the biggest smile. She was alive... and she was whole. Malik’s magic had finally been dissolved.

“I’m sorry... Asheron?” Zared blinked. “But that’s...”

“Your name.” Daida smiled. “Thea never got a chance to tell you, but I’m your older sister. When I was a child, Father used me as a vessel for his puzzle magic, transforming me into a living and thinking labyrinth. I would have been lost forever if it wasn’t for my gifts. Like our mother, I’m a garden nymph. Many thought she was mortal, but in truth her gifts were too simple to be noticed. Before Father’s magic was completed, I transformed into a rose, but could only save half of my spirit before the rest was imprisoned in the maze. Mother never knew the truth until Zared was cursed—that was when she started to question Father’s work. She used her magic to communicate with me and gathered all the information she could leave Zared with before Father stole him away to hide in the tunnels.”

“She... she never knew what our father did to you?” Zared asked with a mortified shadow over his eyes.

“Not until it was too late.” Daida sighed. “But she did everything she could after that. While pregnant, she combined her magic with Ceyden’s before he was even born to enchant the ring she left you. Using Ceyden’s locating gift, and her heart’s desire for her children to come back to her,

she was able to leave you with a tool to survive, and me with instructions to look after you as best as I could in the tunnels.”

Daida stepped forward, her bright eyes sparkling as she looked upon her younger brothers face for the first time in her life. “I know we’ve never spoken until now, but I’ve been with you your whole life. You have no idea how badly I’ve wanted to comfort you or tell you that you weren’t alone.”

Zared stepped forward, gently pulling away from Thea as he approached the sister he never knew he had. Thea could only imagine the rush of emotions he was feeling right then. Anger toward his father, gratitude toward his mother, love toward a sister who had protected him from the walls of a place he only knew as his prison. He didn’t say anything, but instead pulled her into his arms for an embrace that was decades overdue.

Thea wiped a tear from her eye, her heart overflowing as she finally understood what Zared’s mother’s note meant. The key to breaking his curse was in the rose all along. Daida was the one who protected him, and now she was here to help him heal. She only wished she knew what caused his appearance to be altered in the first place.

“Daida?” Thea asked, gently interrupting their embrace as she stepped beside Zared. “If your curse came from Lord Malik, then where did Zared’s come from?”

“I can answer that.” Another new voice joined the tunnels, and the whole trio turned to face the one brave soul who had dared step through the shattered gates. She was clearly a divine one, with beaming green eyes, flawless dark skin, and ebony hair that was pinned delicately on top of her head.

“I remember you.” Daida approached the woman. “You’re Flora; the woman who cursed Zared while I was a rose.”

“You?” Zared gaped, his gaze darting between Daida and the divine one. “But why? I don’t even know you.”

“My apologies, child,” Flora said with a dip of her head. “The curse was never meant to punish you, but the man who dared interfere with the laws of nature.” She glowered in Malik’s direction, who was just now starting to stir awake. “I sensed something was horribly wrong with

Malik's rose but wasn't in a position to do more than send him a warning. I thought threatening his son would be the best way to unravel his pride, but I was poorly mistaken. Your curse was designed to be unraveled when someone escaped his prison, and you were finally brought back into the light. I intended for Malik to put aside the pride in his labyrinth for the sake of his children, and for years, I've regretted putting that much faith in such an unredeemable man."

She dipped her head again, humbly awaiting any anger Zared had toward her. Thea understood what the woman was trying to accomplish, yet Malik's choices led to Zared suffering just as much as his sister.

"Thank you," Zared said, shocking everyone with his heartfelt tone. "Thank you for trying to stop my father's wickedness. I may have been caught in the crossfire, but after seeing what kind of man he became, I'm grateful I wasn't raised under his roof. There's no reason for me to harbor anger or hurt anymore, not when I have a new life and family waiting for me."

"I'm so glad your father's pride was lost on you." Flora smiled. "You are wiser than your years, my boy, and far more loved than you know."

Thea and Daida smiled at Zared, earning a fang-filled grin in return.

"And your curse is nearly broken," Flora continued. "Both of these women have escaped the labyrinth's grip at this point, so all that's left is for you to step into the light."

Zared's smile dropped, his body stiffening as he looked out at the growing crowd of onlookers waiting outside the gate. He'd never been in the sun before, and he'd still be a beast when he was first seen.

"What if they fear me?" Zared asked. "There's no more labyrinth for them to throw me into."

Thea stepped up beside him, taking his hand with a tight squeeze. "Then they'll have to learn to live with you, just like I did."

"Yes, but you didn't like me all that much for a while," Zared reminded her.

"Didn't you try to kill me multiple times?" Thea said with a lift in her brow, and Zared went quiet. "We'll go together." Thea laughed, tugging him lightly by the hand so he moved a few inches forward.

“We’ll *all* go together,” Daida said as she took his other hand.

One step at a time, they led the beast that the kingdom feared into the light. When they reached the gates, Zared had to squint, the sun shrinking his pupils enough where he couldn’t see the faces of those gawking. Thea stood proudly beside him, holding him close to show how proud she was to have him with her.

The crowd backed up as gasps and whispers circulated among them. Zared flinched under their harsh gazes, but he didn’t shrink back. He was no beast, so he had no reason to act like one.

And I love him for it...

A few seconds after he stepped into the light, his palm warmed around Thea’s. She had to let him go, and so did Daida as a bright green light started to beam all around Zared. The crowd backed up even more, some fearing he was releasing some sort of attack while others wondered if this was a way to lure his victims closer.

Thea watched with wide eyes, her brain struggling to comprehend what she was seeing.

His horns shrank back into his head, his snout shifted into a perfect nose, and one by one, his claws stretched into normal fingers. His impossible height shrank, though he was still taller than Thea. His dark fur dissolved except for the thick, black hair that covered his head and framed those striking eyes that never changed. When the glowing finally faded, he was completely human, with his same tattered clothing, no shoes, and features that were easily twice as handsome as his younger brother’s.

“Zared...?” Thea stepped forward, watching as he stared wide-eyed at his clawless hands and hoofless feet. “Is that, you?”

He looked up at her, stopping her heart in its tracks as he gave her the most beaming smile. “Thea! It’s me!”

The crowd circled back, everyone in complete awe at the beast’s transformation and itching to know who this handsome stranger was. Thea stepped toward him, cautiously, at first, as he held out his hand toward her. She took it, tracing her fingers across his without the fear of claws piercing her.

“It is you...” She smiled, drawing closer until she was completely wrapped up in his arms. She pressed a palm against his cheek, feeling strange that there was no fur to warm her hand. “My Zared.”

“My Thea,” he said, tracing a hand through her hair as he inched his face closer to hers. “What do you think? Are you already missing my beastly good looks?”

Thea laughed, brushing her nose against his. “Not exactly, but I wouldn’t mind if you grew a beard.”

“I think I could be persuaded...” he said in a low growl that was strikingly similar to the one he had as a beast. He pulled Thea close, pressing his lips against hers for a deep kiss that was more enchanting than any rose, ring, or labyrinth.

chapter forty-nine

Thea looked out the manor's window, thinking about all the times she had dreamed of a home that would keep her sisters warm and safe. Now that they finally had one, she realized that even the biggest families could never need so much. It was like living in a castle, but without the duty of caring for your citizens. Which was why she and Zared decided to give it all up.

"You're giving me your inheritance?" Ceyden asked as he shifted forward in his seat, nearly colliding with the desk that separated him from Thea and Zared.

"Well, not all of it," Zared said. "I'm splitting it between you and Daida. You'll receive custody of the estate, and Daida will receive the excess lands. As for Malik's fortune, I plan to divide it evenly. I may be the eldest son, but after all Daida has been through, she deserves to live comfortably, and I don't intend to fully rob you of an inheritance you were led to believe was always yours."

Thea smiled at Zared. He could have easily taken Malik's fortune and kept it to himself. Once King Zion heard the truth behind the labyrinth's creation, and the abuse Malik's children had gone through, Malik was immediately banished to Underworth, where he'll be working as a gravedigger for the rest of his extended life. Usually, crimes of that extent were punished with trips to the labyrinth, but for some reason King Hayden was more than happy to offer up another option for the wicked divine one.

After he was banished, all his fortune passed onto Zared, giving him more money than he could have ever dreamed and a manor that was almost as dizzying as the labyrinth.

"Why do I feel like there's a catch to all of this?" Ceyden leaned back in his chair with a stiff lift of his brow. "Why are you *both* telling me this?" Ceyden glared at Thea, but she merely gave him an innocent smile.

“Ah, we’ve only known each other for a month, and you already know me so well, dear brother.” Zared laughed. “Yes, there is a catch. In exchange for your portion of the inheritance, I want you to release Theabelle from the promise she made to you prior to entering the labyrinth.”

Ceyden’s ears turned red, his expression already steaming, despite expecting that this would happen. Ever since Thea stepped back out of the labyrinth, Ceyden had been trying to push for them to wed. The only reason she’d held him off for as long as she did was because she threatened to tell King Zion how he had her framed in the first place. With Zared, Daida, and all her family willing to support her story, it would have been far too easy to get him sent into Underworth’s service alongside his father.

“Break the engagement,” Thea said simply. “And this house, and the life you once had, is all yours.”

Ceyden grumbled a few unsavory words under his breath, glaring at both Zared and Thea for a long moment before releasing a pent-up sigh. “You just had to take everything from me, brother, didn’t you?”

“I could always take more.” Zared shrugged. “Thea’s family might enjoy keeping this house if you don’t want it...”

“That’s enough,” Ceyden huffed. “I accept your deal. It’s clear Thea loves you, anyway. I don’t want a wife who’s always pining for another.”

Zared gave Thea a sly grin, causing heat to flood her cheeks. She’d loved him long before he was human, but he was almost overwhelmingly attractive now that his curse was broken. He looked like Ceyden, but with more mature features, playful expressions, and a perfectly trimmed beard that was coming in nicely. Ceyden was right; if she had married him, she’d always be looking at his brother.

“Glad we’ve come to an agreement.” Zared reached across the table to offer Ceyden a handshake. Ceyden didn’t accept it at first, but after another grumble, he sat forward and accepted his shake. “I’ll get the paperwork written up by the end of the week, and the manor should be yours by the end of the month.”

“The end of the month?” Ceyden lifted a brow. “Why so far away?”

Zared's lips twitched like he wanted to smile, but he kept it pressed tight before a grin could slip through. Thea wasn't sure what had him so amused. Maybe making Ceyden wait was his brotherly way of getting revenge on Ceyden for how he treated Thea in the past?

"I'll have to explain that part later," Zared finally said. "First, I need a moment alone with Thea. If you don't mind, of course."

Ceyden pushed his chair back, the legs screeching on the floor as he wasted no time leaving the office that would soon be his. "Have fun, lovebirds." Ceyden rolled his eyes, then left the room with a few heavy-footed steps.

Zared adjusted his chair so he was facing Thea, and Thea turned to face him. His eyes were so striking, like the silver lining between clouds after the nastiest of storms. She could spend a lifetime looking into those eyes, and now that she was no longer promised to Ceyden...

"You still have my ring," Zared said, pointing to the gold ring that had been on Thea's thumb ever since he gave it to her in the tunnels.

The ring?

Thea looked down at the golden trinket. She'd grown so used to it being there that she'd nearly forgotten she had it on at all. Its magic still coursed through her, but all it ever did was lead her back to Zared now that he was the sole desire of her heart. She tugged the ring free and held it out to him.

"I'm not sure if it will still fit you now," Thea said as she passed it into his palm. "Your hands aren't quite the same beastly size they used to be."

Zared laughed and rolled the ring in his fingers, staring through it like a spyglass to look at Thea. "That's all right, I wasn't planning on wearing it, anyway." He laughed. "Actually, I want you to keep it. I just wanted to make sure it didn't do me any good anymore. For some reason, it only wants to point me toward you."

Thea's cheeks warmed, her heart fluttering as Zared gave her a mischievous smile. "I suppose it's useless for both of us, then."

"Not entirely," Zared said, taking Thea's hand as he shifted out of his seat, pressing one knee to the floor. "I have another use for this ring, so

long as you're willing to keep wearing it. I'll just need to get it resized for the proper finger."

Thea's breath snagged in her throat, her heart going wild as Zared gazed at her with the most affectionate look that could have melted her where she sat.

"Theabelle Aynna," Zared said her name so beautifully, like it was the first syllables of a poem he'd spent years perfecting. "I may not have a mansion, a crown, or even a divine gift to grant you power. I've spent my inheritance on a piece of land in Mortalia with enough space for all your family and a humble life for a beast-turned-man. I've spent enough days alone to know that solitude isn't a life I can endure, so today, I'm asking you to join me in this new life, and together, we can get lost under the sun instead of in the dark. Will you marry me, Theabelle?"

Yes wasn't a strong enough word, but not even a yes could pass through her lips as she nodded mutely with tears streaming down her cheeks. Zared smiled, pulling her into her arms as she collapsed into his enchanting embrace.

"It's perfect," she whispered in his ear, digging her fingers into the back of his shirt as she pulled him tighter. "Yes, I'll marry you. I would love nothing more."

Zared pulled back, keeping his grip tight on her as he shifted to see her beaming face. He held her so differently now that he was human. It was still tender, yet somehow more animalistic now that he didn't fear injuring her. He cradled her like a protective beast who wouldn't hesitate to fight for the one he loved.

"Are you sure? I've been told I can be rather *beastly*," he said with a teasing growl, hooking a finger under her chin. "Are you sure you want to run away from Olympia with a monster like me?"

Thea dug her hand into the back of his hair, giving him a sassy smile as she fearlessly pulled him closer. "You're no monster." She brushed his lips against his, pulling away before he could dive into the kiss. "Though I have been rather fond of beasts... You wouldn't happen to know any, would you?"

Zared bit back a laugh right before his patience shattered. He pulled Thea closer, wrapping his arms around her waist as he kissed her like the

beast was still trapped inside his soul. Thea brushed his face, her fingers tickling against his prickly beard.

Perhaps she still loved a beast, after all.

epilogue

It turned out that Zared wanted to keep the manor until the end of the month because he planned for it to be the perfect wedding venue.

Daída sprouted rose bushes all along the edges of the garden and sprinkled the most beautiful rose petals down the aisle. Thea's sisters walked down first as her attendants, each looking stunning in their soft pink gowns and braided crowns.

Thea waited at the back of the aisle for her cue to step out, her heart hammering as she tightened her grip on her father's arm.

"Just look at Zared," her father murmured with a loving pat on her silk sleeve. "Then nothing else will matter."

"Thank you, Father," Thea said as she let out a nervous sigh. "You're right."

"If you can walk bravely into a cursed labyrinth, then I'm certain you can walk down the aisle to its beast." Father winked, and Thea fought back a giggle.

Everything was perfect. The skies were a striking blue, and the air was filled with the sweet scent of roses. Thea never imagined having a wedding in Olympia, but it just felt right since that was where she and Zared first met. Technically speaking, they first met in the labyrinth, but that wasn't exactly a location they could return to anymore. Not to mention, the skeletons would make for some odd decorations.

"Please rise for the bride," Flora's voice echoed past the crowd, followed by the shuffle of all the guests rising to their feet.

"Are you ready?" her father asked, his eyes twinkling at her with the widest smile a father could wear.

"As I'll ever be," Thea replied. "Like you said, it can't be as scary as entering a labyrinth."

Except, it was.

Thea's heart hammered with each step, growing more anxious the closer she got to having all eyes on her. Her long satin train trailed behind her, collecting rose petals along the hem with each step. Her veil fluttered in the wind, catching flashes of light as the sheer fabric danced in the sun. She squeezed her bouquet of roses so tight, she feared she might break one of the stems, but when they finally stepped up to the end of the aisle, it only took one glance up for all the fear to melt away.

Those eyes never cease to make everything else disappear...

Zared smiled at her, flooding her body like a fresh breath of air as her father guided her to the tempo of the strumming harp. Her steps felt too slow now. She wanted to be closer to him, wrapped up in his arms, and by his side for the rest of their days.

She caught a quick glance of the other guests, smiling to herself when she noticed King Hayden and Queen Priscilla in one of the back rows. Her sisters were all misty-eyed, each one clutching a silk handkerchief in their hand as they watched Thea cross in front of them in a rich white gown instead of a blood-red frock.

"Who gives this woman?" Flora asked, smiling down at Thea and her father.

"Her sisters and I," Father said proudly as he passed Thea's hand to Zared's, immediately sending sparks across her skin.

Father joined her sisters in the front, and the ceremony began. Flora gave a beautiful speech about how their love triumphed over curses, but to be honest, Thea couldn't remember much of what was said. She and Zared locked eyes the entire time, their hands entangled in each other's as they anxiously waited for the final moment to arrive. They exchanged vows and rings, but the true tension between them was left unspoken as they inched closer and closer, waiting for Flora to finally pronounce them as one.

"You look eager," Zared whispered to her, careful to keep anyone else from hearing.

Thea smiled. "As do you."

"What can I say, I'm ready to get lost in those pretty brown eyes forever."

“Be careful exploring places you can’t get out of,” Thea said as Flora wrapped up the end of the ceremony. “Not every key goes to a door, remember?”

“That’s fine with me...” Zared inched closer, their faces only inches apart as Flora gave them permission to kiss in the background of their whispers. “Because it’s a place I never want to escape from.”

And then he kissed her.

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Special thanks to Sarah for being the biggest Fairmyth fan!